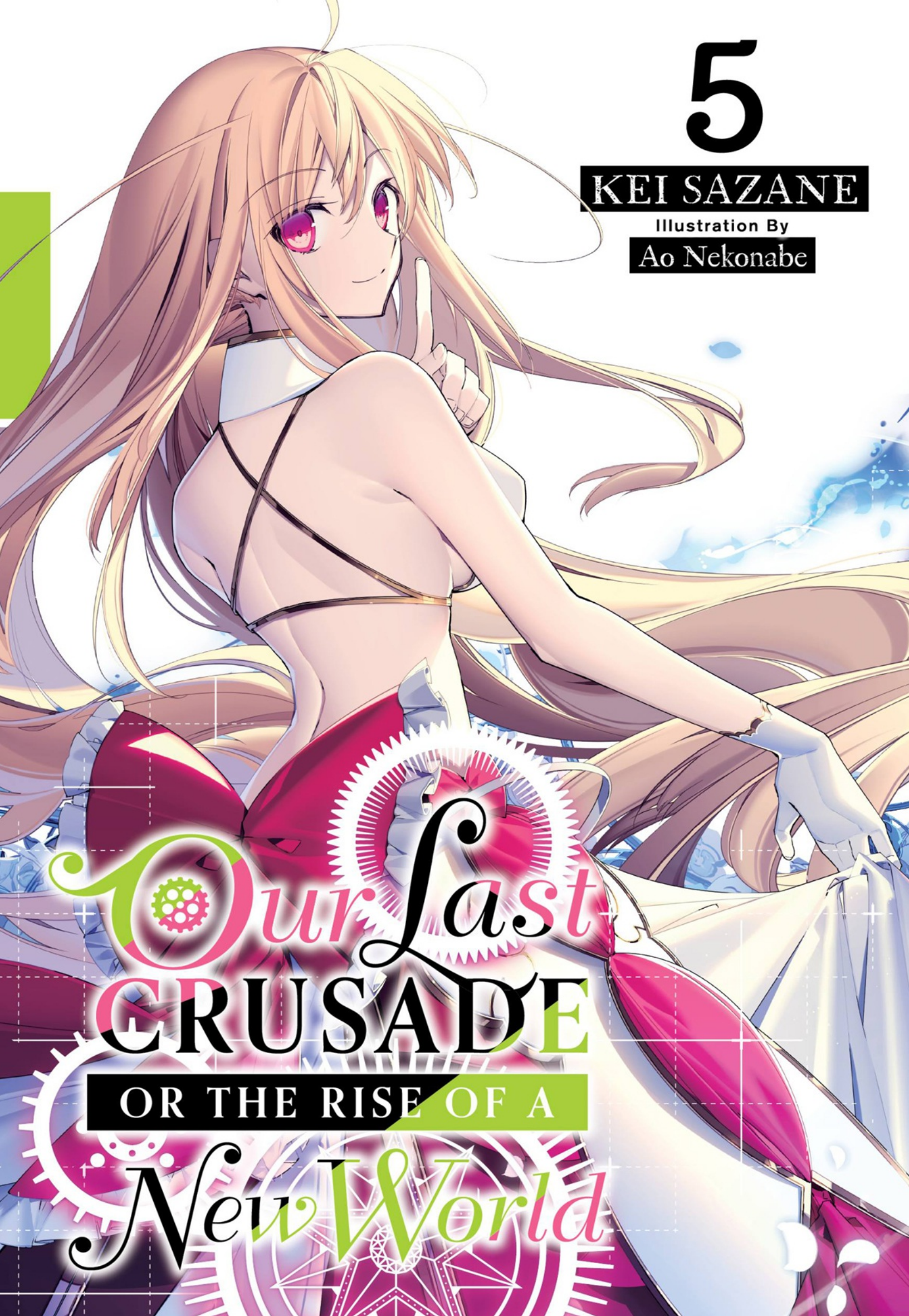




5

KEI SAZANE

Illustration By
Ao Nekonabe

Our Last
CRUSADE

OR THE RISE OF A

New World

VISIT...

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5

KEI SAZANE

Illustration By
Ao Nekonabe

Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

“As your
one and
only
rival, I
have the
right to
know.”

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Second-born princess of the Nebulis
Sovereignty. Sick of the family feud over the
throne. Can't seem to stop obsessing over her
younger sister's attempts to get close to Iska.

Utopia Powered by Machines

THE HEAVENLY EMPIRE



Iska

Member of Unit 907—Special Defense for Humankind, Third Division. Used to be the youngest soldier who ever reached the highest rank in the military, the Saint Disciples. Stripped of his title for helping a witch break out of prison. Wields a black astral sword to intercept astral power and its white counterpart to reproduce the last attack obstructed by its pair. An honest swordsman fighting for peace.



Mismis Klass

The commander of Unit 907. Baby-faced and often mistaken for a child, but actually a legal adult. Klutzy but responsible. Trusts her subordinates. Became a witch after plunging into a vortex.



Jhin Syulargun

The sniper of Unit 907. Prides himself on his deadly aim. Can't seem to shake off Iska, since they trained under the same mentor. Cool and sarcastic, though he has a soft spot for his buddies.



Nene Alkastone

Chief mechanic of Unit 907. Weapon-making genius. Mastered operation of a satellite that releases armor-piercing shots from a high altitude. Thinks of Iska as her older brother. Wide-eyed and loveable.

Risya In Empire

Saint Disciple of the fifth seat. Genius-of-all-trades. A beautiful woman often seen in a suit and glasses with dark green frames. Likes Mismis, her former classmate.

Nameless

Saint Disciple of the eighth seat. Covered from head to toe in an optical camouflage suit. Speaks in a digital voice. Started off in the assassination unit. Boasts physical prowess.

Paradise for Witches

THE NEBULIS SOVEREIGNTY



Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Second-born princess of Nebulis. Leading candidate for the next queen. Strongest astral mage, who attacks with ice. Feared by the Empire as the Ice Calamity Witch. Hates all the backstabbing happening in the Sovereignty. Enraptured by fair fights against Iska, an enemy swordsman she met on the battlefield.



Rin Vispose

Alice's attendant. An astral mage controlling earth. Maid uniform conceals weapons for assassination. Skilled at deadly espionage. Hard to read her expressions, but has an inferiority complex about her chest.



Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX

Youngest princess of Nebulis. Aliceliese's little sister. Possesses Illumination, which reproduces footage of past events. Saved by Iska when she was captured in the Empire.



Lord Mask On

A member of the House of Zoa, which directly competes with the princesses for the throne. A conspirator whose true motives are unclear.



Kissing Zoa Nebulis

A powerful astral mage. Called the favorite child of the Zoa. Possesses astral power of thorns.



Salinger

Strongest sorcerer. Imprisoned for attempting to assassinate the queen. Currently at large.



Elletear Lou Nebulis IX

Eldest princess of Nebulis. Focused on traveling abroad. Often absent from the palace.

A full-page illustration of a young woman with long, flowing green hair that has a golden tint. She is wearing a white off-the-shoulder top with a black bodice and a long white skirt. She has a red gemstone necklace and is holding a small blue object near her face. The background is a bright, hazy sky with some dark clouds.

“No need
to look so
solemn
when
you’re
saying
something
so funny,
my
Queen...”

**Elletear Lou
Nebulis IX**

Eldest daughter of
Queen Mirabella.
Older sister to
Aliceliese and Sisbell.
Has emerald hair
with a golden tint.
Possesses more
voluptuous curves
than Aliceliese.

Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

5

KEI SAZANE

Illustration by
Ao Nekonabe


NEW YORK

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Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World 5

KEI SAZANE

Translation by Jan Cash

Cover art by Ao Nekonabe

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KIMI TO BOKU NO SAIGO NO SENJO, ARUIWA SEKAI GA HAJIMARU SEISEN
Vol.5

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First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo,
through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: December 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Cataloging in Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-0579-6 (paperback)

978-1-9753-0580-2 (ebook)

E3-20201105-JV-NF-ORI

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Shie-la So hem Sec nazal, uc Ec lishe.

Blot out my sins with your love.

vea Sez sis xel sfrei fears.

So it may allow me to remain myself.

vea Ez nec cia nes edear.

And prevent you from becoming a witch.

PROLOGUE



Elletear

In the Paradise of Witches.

The queen's sitting room in the royal palace.

Light filtered through the lace curtains, illuminating the reception hall and reflecting off the dewy leaves of the potted plants. With the wine-red carpet unfurled on the floor, the picturesque space was almost antithetical to the ominous connotation typically associated with the word *witch*.

Queen Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX stood on the landing of the staircase and spoke to her eldest daughter, Elletear, who nodded in greeting and smiled up at her from the base of the steps.

"Elletear, I have two questions for you."

"Oh? And what could they be?"

Elletear's smile froze on her face when the queen posed the first question.

"Were you the one who divulged Sisbell's location?"

"..."

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX suddenly went silent, stopping in her tracks—even standing there motionless, her beauty was unmistakable. Her hair, emerald in color with a tint of beautiful gold, billowed behind her. She was taller than Alice and more well-endowed, though her large breasts were concealed by her royal dress. Her allure was almost irresistible.

"And one more question," the queen said, looking down upon her daughter standing at the base of the steps.

"Are you the real Elletear?"

Silence settled over the reception hall after her cold voice stopped ringing through the space, but it was quickly interrupted when the princess burst into peals of laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Is something the matter, Elletear?”

“I...I wasn’t sure what you would say next! My queen. No need to look so solemn when you’re saying something so funny.”

Elletear clutched her stomach as she roared with laughter.

The queen remained stoic. “I ordered Sisbell to go to the independent state of Alsamira. We suspected they were building covert relations with the Empire.”

That had been the third princess’s mission.

And only the select few who were informed by the queen herself had known about it.

“For some reason, the Zoa were aware of it the next day. It seems Lord Mask made his way to Alsamira—as though he were pursuing Sisbell.”

“ ... ”

“Someone leaked this information. Alice and the rest of my inner circle were all in my range...except for one person.”

All signs pointed to the eldest princess betraying her. A dozen hours after hearing of Sisbell’s destination, there had been only one person who slipped out of the queen’s sight.

“For more than fifty years, we’ve had a contested relationship with the other descendants of the Founder—the Zoa,” continued the queen.

“Because of the conclave, the consecration ceremony for the throne.”

“My eldest daughter is well aware of the troubles surrounding our blood relations. She wouldn’t dare tell them of Sisbell’s whereabouts.”

Elletear was silent.

“Because of that, I need to ask you: Are you the real Elletear?”

The queen’s gaze swept from the landing on the stairs to the carpeted hall. Her eyes beheld the princess, who should have been her dear daughter.

“ ... ”

“No response?”

“...Ha! Ha-ha! Stop it! Don’t look at me like that, my queen! I can’t bear it!”

She broke into a fit of giggles again. It was louder this time, the sound of it filling the chamber.

“Ha-ha-ha. O-oh... Get a hold of yourself, Elletear. That was the last thing I expected you to say—”

Her chest heaved under her royal dress, threatening to wiggle out from the folds of the fabric. Elletear couldn’t help herself. Her shoulders shook from laughter.

“That’s *my* question, my impostor queen.”

The air shifted in the sitting room.

“I might not look like the type, but I actually love to play games. I love to deceive others and be tricked myself. But the latter doesn’t happen very often, so it’s nice to feel this rush of adrenaline.”

“...”

The queen was silent.

That was an answer in its own way.

Elletear stepped forward.

Click. Clack. Her heels made crisp clicks as she climbed the stairs, approaching the queen on the landing.

“Ow. My stomach hurts from laughing so hard. Who are you, impostor?”

Elletear was in front of Queen Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX. They were eye level now.

“An impressive recreation. Alice and Sisbell also might have seen through your trick, given two more minutes. But unfortunately for you, *I am the eldest* .”

Two minutes sounded insignificant, but it made a world of a difference. The eldest princess was not like the others.

“Don’t you think this has gone on long enough?”

“.....”

Fireworks went off, and the queen’s body started to unravel. Elletear watched with a tiny smile as a petite girl emerged from within the form of the false queen.

The girl’s black hair was cut evenly at her shoulders. Her baby face appeared to be so frightened that it was hard to believe she had been calmly pretending to be the queen just a moment before.

“I-I’m so sorry! P-please forgive me!”

“What a cutie. Hm...? Okay. I accept your apology. I hate scolding adorable girls anyway.” Elletear ran her fingers through the hair of the girl, who couldn’t have been older than thirteen or fourteen.

She let out a little sigh of relief when the eldest princess seemed merciful.

“Are you new here? Did you start living in the palace while I was abroad?”

“Y-yes...!” The girl with black hair nodded furiously.

Serving as proof of her witch-hood, an astral crest glowed gray at the nape of her neck.

Gray. She must have possessed magic that allowed her to conceal her identity with shadows.

“Have you grown used to life at the palace?” Elletear looked at her.

“...Y-yes.” She gulped, clearly infatuated with Elletear.

The princess had been blessed with bewitching beauty from birth.

The girl’s eyes were level with the princess’s cleavage, and it was impossible not to notice her provocative physique. Elletear’s natural allure was powerful enough to mesmerize someone of the same gender, so it was unsurprising that she would captivate this child.

Like magic cast by a real witch.

“Uh, um. Lady Elletear?”

“What is it, newbie?”

“Um...how did you see through my disguise? I thought my body and voice were an exact copy of Her Majesty.”

“Yes, it was perfect...down to her little habit of peeking at her companion’s fingertips during the conversation.”

“Th-then how...?”

“Let’s see...” Elletear put her hand to her lips as though she were lost in thought. “I suppose because I possess something *similar to your astral power* .”

“—Ngh!”

“But yours is outstanding, unlike mine. I envy you.”

“...That’s not true! I...”

Her expression froze on her face when she realized Elletear was ridiculing herself.

Everyone in the palace knew the eldest princess possessed *the weakest power among the Founder’s bloodline* .

“Your astral energy is splendid.”

“Um... Ah...”

“Elletear. Don’t be mean,” someone scolded.

From the shadows of the stained glass appeared the true queen. Even a machine would have difficulty distinguishing her from her copy made by the young girl.

“She’s only carrying out my orders,” said the queen. “Forgive her.”

“No need for forgiveness. Hee-hee-hee... I had fun.” Elletear continued to stroke the girl’s hair. “Now, Mother. Did you call me out to ask me that? Did you think I informed Lord Mask of Sisbell’s whereabouts?”

“...That was *one* reason.”

Showered by sunlight from behind, the queen let out a little sigh.

“I didn’t summon you to question you. It was necessary to resolve misconceptions about you. About that—”

Hurried footsteps pounded the hallway outside the queen's room.

"P-please slow down, Lady Alice! Running through this hall is forbidden. See? You're putting the soldiers in a tough place!"

"No time for that, Rin. Come with me."

"You know you can't just open the door to the queen's room!"

"It's an emergency! What do you expect me to do?"

One of the double doors burst open, and a girl practically tumbled into the room.

She was panting. Her golden hair was disheveled.

"Hff. Haah ... Mother! Wait. What? Elletear...?"

Aliceliese. The second-born princess.

Alice looked at the queen, Elletear, and the new girl.

"Uh, um, Mother... I mean, Your Highness!"

The queen's eyebrows knitted together.

"What's the matter, Alice? You're out of breath. You seem agitated."

Though Alice lacked Elletear's unwavering composure, she normally carried herself with the grace of a princess. It was strange to see her without it.

Something significant must have happened.

"It's about Sisbell."

She placed her hand over her pounding chest. Alice seemed to have trouble getting her words out.

"I need to consult with you about her situation. Immediately!"

CHAPTER 1



Witch's Exchange

1

The independent state of Alsamira.

A massive desert sprawling over the eastern side of the largest continent in the world. A country-sized resort locked in an endless summer. The temperature always hovered near 104 degrees, but the air was dry, so the sunlight was agreeable and pleasing.

The urban oasis was built up with gigantic pools, spas, and classy hotels.

In one such hotel, on a top floor....

"I knew it. The newspapers and gossip magazines have been running this story on the front page for the past two days."

Jhin, the silver-haired sniper, chucked a newspaper onto the table.

"Summer Resort Turns to Shambles Overnight Late at night, a large explosion detonated on the outskirts of the Alsamira municipality in a crude oil mining area."

He looked down at the article.

"This must have made its way to Imperial headquarters by now. Well, I guess they would've found out when the Object was destroyed anyway. They're not the type to let go of failed communications without asking questions."

"...Jeez," Iska groaned from the floor of the room.

He had been sitting on his knees for an hour as an act of self-inflicted punishment.

"I am so sorry..."

"It's not your fault. The enemy blindsided you. But honestly, I don't think you

have been acting like yourself lately.”

Jhin settled onto the sofa. He was wearing a tank top that exposed his shoulders, which was unusual for him. However, he could not wear anything with sleeves currently because his arm was wrapped in a bandage spanning from his shoulder to his elbow.

It had been inflicted upon him during their recent fight against Lord Mask.

Two days prior, he had been wounded while unexpectedly battling the astral corps of the Nebulis Sovereignty in the outskirts of the country.

“First, you get abducted from a neutral city and taken to the Sovereignty. This time, you get involved with the astral corps after going on a walk by yourself.”

“...I’m ashamed.”

“Jhin, come on. Don’t be so mean to Iska,” chimed in Nene. “Besides, the Sovereignty are at fault for attacking him outside a battlefield.”

Nene Alkastone had the body of a model and a full head of red hair tied up in a ponytail. She was in charge of their communications as the mechanic of the unit.

She held a first aid kit next to Jhin. “It’s time to disinfect your wound. This is important. We need to change out your bandages, too.”

“But it’s only been seven hours.”

“No ‘buts.’ What would you do if your wound started to fester? It’s on your dominant hand, and you’re a sniper. You don’t want to lose the ability to use your right arm, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s why we need to treat it.”

Jhin begrudgingly held out his right arm. Nene snipped through the bandages and sprayed disinfectant on the puckered wound.

“Just when I thought we were getting a real break after literally escaping death three times...,” Jhin said, sighing. “It isn’t strange for the enemy to keep an eye on us. But why would the witch that Iska helped out of prison be *here* ?

Out of all places? Feels like the chances are one in a million.”

“...I couldn’t believe my eyes.”

It had only been four days since they had left the Empire and entered this country. He hadn’t expected a reunion to be waiting for him upon arrival.

“Saint Disciple Iska, do you know who I am?”

“My name is Sisbell. I am honored you remember me.”

Doe-eyed and full of curiosity. Shiny strawberry-blond hair. There was something about her loveable face that rivaled Alice’s grace.

The youngest princess of the Paradise of Witches. Sisbell.

It turned out that the witch whom Iska had saved from the Imperial prison a year prior was *the princess* .

...Her astral crest was so weak, I hadn’t even considered it.

...I never would have guessed she could be a purebred.

The powers of the royal family were known to be formidable, so based on Sisbell’s rather insubstantial crest, the Imperial army must have had no idea they had captured royalty when they imprisoned her back then. For the same reason, Iska had also assumed she was just a random witch.

“Like I said yesterday: This was just a coincidence. She was surprised to see us, too.”

“Obviously. Otherwise, that would mean we’re being tailed by them. And I would never let that happened. So, what happened to her?”

“I don’t know. It looked like she was their target. I imagine she left the country that night. I think the one who was after her was the one you fought, Jhin.”

“...That Lord Mask guy? I guess I remember him saying that.”

This had been the second time that they had fought against Jhin’s enemy, after first battling each other for the vortex.

“We had no intention of escalating things. Our goal was to take home one of our fellow mages. Why would an Imperial soldier protect her?”

Silence settled over them for a few seconds.

Jhin looked away from the ceiling, leaning forward in his seat on the sofa.

“Guess it worked out well for us.”

“Hey! Jhin. Stay still. I won’t be able to secure your bandages.”

“Whatever.” He let her do her job. “Long story short, the astral corps were targeting the witch that you helped a year ago. I don’t know if she’s a criminal or a traitor, but it’s safe to assume Lord Mask and his crew aren’t holing up in Alsamira to come after *us* .”

Sisbell must have left the country overnight—to flee to another foreign state or to return to Nebulis. Either way, Lord Mask must have ordered the troops to pursue her. There was no reason for them to stay behind and focus their energy on Unit 907.

“Right, Iska?”

“Yeah. Even though we were involved in that skirmish, I think it would be safer for us to stay here.”

“So we’re back on vacation time, huh? Not that I feel like letting loose... By the way...”

Jhin motioned around the room. There were only three of them present—Iska, Jhin, and Nene. They were missing one last person.

“Is the boss still out? I was betting it’d be thirty minutes tops before she got bored of training in the gym upstairs.”

“She’s feeling inspired.”

Mismis had allowed her subordinate to get wounded when he’d protected her. To channel her feelings of regret, she had started up a rigorous training regimen.

“But what’s taking her so long...? I hope she’s okay.”

“Want me to go look?” Nene offered.

She got to her feet and headed to the corner of the room, where she transferred a change of clothes and a towel into a smaller handbag.

“A towel? What’s that for?”

“For when I get the commander.”

“...?”

“I know what I’m doing. Trust me. Be right back!”

Upstairs in the fitness area lined with treadmills, stationary bikes, and other workout equipment.

There was a pool area and two paths for different genders leading to sauna rooms full of billowing white steam.

“Aaah... This is the life...”

The wood panels in the room smelled like white birch.

Early morning, the commander was indulging in a moment of luxury in the empty sauna.

Mismis Klass.

Even though she was twenty-two, her baby face allowed her to get away with paying a child’s admission price at the movies. She looked even younger than Nene, who was seventeen. In fact, she barely met the height and weight requirements for the military. There were even rumors that she had hidden thick insoles inside her socks to increase her height enough to get enlisted.

“I got to sweat it out at the gym and burn some energy at the pool and loosen up in the sauna... It feels so good to treat yourself...”

Sweat streamed down her thin neck.

She flopped over to her side, covering her nude body with just a towel. Mismis didn’t even seem to care when it slid out of place.

“It’s too early for anyone to come in here.”

It was like she was in bed at home. It felt so good to let the steam warm up her exhausted body.

“Iska said the enemy must be out of the country. And it’s not like they would attack inside the resort.”

It would be a huge scandal if they tried to get them inside a hotel. The independent states hadn't declared neutrality, which meant the Sovereignty would make an instant opponent out of Alsamira if an astral mage were to attack here. That was likely what deterred them from attacking.

"Which is why we can standby... Aah. This feels amazing."

She rolled over, lying flush on her back. Looking up at the steam swirling near the ceiling made her eyelids grow heavy.

"Phew... I feel like I could take a nap."

"That would leave you dehydrated, Commander."

"It'll be fine. Don't be so hard on me, Nene... Wait." Mismis rubbed at her eyes.

Out of the fog appeared a girl with a ponytail in a bathrobe.

"Found you!"

"Are you here to blow off a little steam?"

"No! I'm here to check in on you. Just look at you! All sprawled out..."

The subordinate folded her arms, looking awkwardly at her captain's indiscreet presentation. Nene's eyes traveled down to the open towel and the thin line of her belly button and then back up to her twin peaks, which had managed to retain their shape even as she lay flat. A bead of sweat slipped between her breasts, which had flushed pink from the steam. There was no other way to describe the scene other than sensual.

However, for Nene, it was embarrassing to see her captain in this state.

"I can see everything."

"Wh-what?!"

"I learned that people like you are called exhibitionists."

"H-hey! You just caught me off guard!" Mismis shot up, wrapping herself up in the towel. "Nene. Come join me."

"Maybe for a little bit. I don't want you to pass out in here." Nene sat down next to her.

The wood door creaked open. A petite girl entered the sauna.

“Pardon me.”

She had a thin bath towel wrapped around her body.

Even through the mist, they could see her hair was strawberry blond. With her youthful face and stature, she looked like a doll come to life.

Mismis could swear they had met before. But where?

“Hey, doesn’t she look familiar?” Nene asked Mismis quietly.

“You, too, Nene? Who is she?”

They might have recognized her if they had bumped into her on the streets. But without her clothes or hair done up, they only had her face as a clue.

“...Hmm.” Mismis and Nene tilted their heads quizzically.

The girl approached them without uttering a word and gave Mismis a once-over. The captain promptly sat up as straight as a ramrod.

The girl chuckled. “Hey, you.”

“What? Me?”

“Yes, you. This—” She reached out.

Mismis had no time to react as the girl’s fingertip stretched toward her left shoulder.

“What is this?” The girl tugged off the skin-toned bandage from the captain’s arm.

Astral light filled the room—glowing green from Mismis’s shoulder.

“Ah... H-hey!”

“Hide it, Commander! Hurry!”

Nene acted on instinct, whipping the towel off her body and pressing it against the captain’s arm to hide the proof that Mismis was a witch.

It was only the three of them in the sauna room. There were no other witnesses. But who knew if someone else would enter?

Outside of Imperial territory in an independent state like Alsamira, it was unlikely that anyone would be openly hostile to witches. However, there were always individuals who harbored covert animosity toward them, and it was not worth the risk of exposure.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Nene launched herself onto the girl. She didn’t even care that she wasn’t covered by a towel anymore.

Though they were about the same age, Nene towered over her.

“This is a medical bandage for covering wounds. How could you just pull it off?!”

“Oh, sorry.” The girl feigned ignorance. “I didn’t mean it. But I have *something on hand*.”

“...What?”

“You can never feel too secure with the ones from the Empire. Even if they can hide the light, the astral energy will still leak out, though it’s indiscernible to the eye.”

She held a milky-white adhesive in her hand. She applied it over Mismis’s astral crest with learned movements. Lo and behold, the light started to disappear.

It was almost too quick.

This hadn’t happened when she used Imperial medical bandages.

“Huh...?!” Nene’s eyes went wide.

Not processing the events, Mismis could only balk at her own skin.

“It’s water-resistant, but don’t submerge it.” The girl turned her back to them, placing her hand on the sauna door.

Mismis was flustered. “W-wait! You—”

“I can’t bear the sauna. And I’m not used to having naked conversations.”

She turned to the side, flashing them an elegant smile, flushed from the steam.

“I’ll be waiting at the café on the seventeenth floor.”

At the same time, in the queen's room in the royal palace of Nebulis.

The sun had not risen to its zenith yet. Alice stood next to the queen. Her attendant, Rin, was behind her. At that moment, they were the only ones occupying the space.

"Mother... My queen, are you sure...?"

"If you're concerned about Elletear, you have no reason to worry."

Alice's older sister had left the room.

Alice seemed to broach the topic with sensitivity, while the queen was direct.

"It would be difficult for you to discuss Sisbell with me around, right?"

"I haven't been cleared of the suspicion that I leaked her location to the Zoa."

If Elletear was a traitor...it meant the House of Zoa would hear about the information disclosed in Alice's report on Sisbell.

That was why she had left of her own accord.

...Except...this situation makes it look like I chased away my own sister...

Alice felt guilty for telling only her mother about Sisbell's whereabouts.

She was going to apologize to Elletear later. Alice turned her face to the queen.

"This is..." Her mother sighed. "This is inconvenient that she's been suspected of having ties to the Empire—by Lord Mask, no less."

"...Yes."

"The Zoa will see this as their golden opportunity. They'll destabilize us so that they can attempt to take the throne. What should we do?"

The queen looked up at the stained glass. Alice sneakily exchanged looks with Rin, nodding covertly.

—All good?

Rin nodded back.

“Mother, Sisbell said she would go into hiding for some time.”

Alice had five items to report to the queen: First, Sisbell had been saved a year ago by an Imperial soldier named Iska.

Second, it had been a coincidence that she’d recently run into him in the independent state of Alsamira.

Third, Sisbell had contacted him, wanting to know his motivations for saving her.

Fourth, Lord Mask had witnessed their exchange.

And finally, Lord Mask was seeking to expose Sisbell as a traitor.

That had been the information that Alice had managed to procure from her younger sister. And when she had heard about her sister’s connection with Iska, she couldn’t believe her ears.

“It happened one year ago...”

“When I made a mistake and was caught by the Empire, an Imperial soldier saved me while I was imprisoned.”

The soldier in question had been Iska...of all people.

Stripped of his title of Saint Disciple after he’d been charged with his crimes, Iska had been dispatched to the battlefield as one of many soldiers. That had been when he met Alice.

...Hold on. Does that mean Sisbell met Iska before me?

...Whatever! It’s not like we’re calling dibs or anything!

Alice and Iska had gotten to know each other well enough to declare themselves rivals.

Their relationship was nothing like the one between Sisbell and Iska. It was something more complex and predestined. It was as if the very Empire and Sovereignty had reached an understanding.

There wasn’t room for anyone else. Right?

“Yeah. There’s no way Sisbell and Isk—”

“Lady Alice?”

“Ah...! N-nothing, Mother... Ha-ha-ha.” She tried to laugh it off.

Rin stepped forward in response. “Your Majesty, if I may, there is something I would like to say.”

“And what would that be, Rin?”

“In regard to the fourth point of Lady Alice’s report.”

“...You mean Lord Mask?” The queen let out another sigh.

“Lady Sisbell went to Alsamira to oblige your decree. It is eerie that Lord Mask was there, ready to ambush her.”

“.....”

“Someone must have leaked her destination to the Zoa. It seems unlikely that Lord Mask would be the one who was dispatched there otherwise.”

He was the closest to their head of family.

If he had been the one to make a move, he must have expected an incident that could destabilize Sisbell from her position. Without solid evidence that something debilitating would happen, it was hard to imagine he would make the effort to go there.

...In other words, Lord Mask was expecting Sisbell to meet with an Imperial soldier.

...But something isn’t adding up. Sisbell said that their reunion was coincidental.

Those two points yielded inconsistencies. There was only one explanation—“Your Majesty. If I may, I would like to add further comment,” said Rin anxiously.

“I think *the one who divulged Lady Sisbell’s destination has a connection to the Imperial forces.*” “On what basis?”

“Based on the situation.” Rin seemed certain.

Alice and Rin had reached this conclusion upon their return to the Sovereignty.

“Lord Mask traveled to Alsamira himself. That means the Zoa were sure that something would happen there. They were confident Lady Sisbell would contact an Imperial soldier.”

“...And?”

“They couldn’t have known an Imperial unit was in Alsamira unless they were aware of the movements of their military. The traitor disclosed Lady Sisbell’s destination to the Zoa at the most opportune time.”

The traitor had been certain about it.

Like fire mixing with oxygen, a meeting between the youngest princess and an Imperial swordsman had the potential to be explosive. It was only a matter of time.

“Rin,” the queen called out. “Do you know who the ‘traitor’ may be?”

“...By process of elimination.”

“Go ahead. I give you permission.”

“The eldest princess.”

“Of course.”

Alice became almost deflated when the queen seemed to accept it.

“That was my conclusion, too. That is why I called her on her own.”

However, there was no evidence. And no one wanted to believe they were betrayed by a family member.

“Alice, where is Sisbell now?”

“She said she would remain in hiding for some time. I think it would be dangerous for her to return to the Sovereignty without knowing the identity of the traitor.”

“So she’s staying in Alsamira?”

“...I believe so. But she may move around.”

There was a possibility that she would hide away in one of the surrounding countries instead. It was a no-brainer for Sisbell to leave Alsamira to escape the

eyes of the Zoa.

“Her astral powers are not suited for self-defense. She might resist, but we need to dispatch my guards... Come, Kisasage, Warvick.”

Queen Mirabella snapped her fingers.

The tiny click bounded off the walls, echoing for a few seconds before fading.

“You were listening, right? You will go guard Sisbell.”

“—Yes.”

“Lady Sisbell is your dear daughter. We vow to bring her back to the palace safely.”

...My mother's best guards, huh?

Suddenly, the mages serving the queen appeared from nowhere as though rising from a mirage. This man and woman were part of the Planetary Domiciles, guards of the royal family.

What the—? That was bad for my health...

The two guards had been there from the very beginning—silent and indiscernible to the eye, always on standby.

It was said their astral powers of concealment exceeded even the best optical camouflage offered by the Empire. Not that Alice could confirm this, since she'd only seen them a handful of times.

“It would be easier to protect her if she stayed in Alsamira. I wonder if she's still there. I hope it goes well.”

The two guards disappeared without a moment to spare. The queen folded her arms together.

“Alice, I have something to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“About the Imperial soldier who you said Sisbell had encountered in Alsamira. Did you see his face? Who in the world was he?”

“No. I'm afraid I don't know.”

Rin looked like she wanted to say something. Alice ignored her.

“I didn’t meet him in Alsamira or in the battlefield of the neutral city. Um. Anything else, Rin?”

“I think it would be wise to shut your mouth.”

“Right. I don’t know anything about him, Mother—not even the smallest detail about this Imperial soldier named Iska.”

“You’re making it more suspicious.”

“Shh, Rin...! Please...!”

Alice avoided making eye contact.

3

In the independent state of Alsamira. Inside the café on the seventeenth floor of Garnet Hotel.

“May I take your order?”

The girl with strawberry-blond hair gave her order to the smiling waitstaff. “A strawberry shake, please.”

The girl addressed the people sitting at her table. “Thank you for joining me, Commander Mismis, Iska, and Nene. And also Jhin. Tell me if I got your names wrong.”

Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX. The daughter of the current queen. One from the bloodline of the Founder.

“Oh, just to clarify things: I looked into each of your names myself. I didn’t get them from Iska.”

“That’s beside the point.”

The table was set up for six.

Iska, Nene, and Mismis sat on one side of the booth, while Sisbell was on the other side by herself. Jhin had been the one who had made the comment, and he had foregone a seat, standing by the table.

“We heard about you from Iska. Tell us what you want.”

“Before I do that, won’t you sit down?”

“I don’t see any open seats.”

“What about the ones next to me?”

The luxurious genuine-leather sofa could comfortably fit three adults—maybe even four, if they were petite women.

Sisbell patted the two spaces beside her.

“Right here. Either to my left or to my right. Your choice.”

Jhin was silent.

The sweet girl narrowed her eyes.

“Oh?” Her gaze seemed threatening. “Do you hate the idea of sharing a seat with a witch?”

“Do you just want to make small talk? If so, then I’m leaving.”

“...”

“If you need to discuss something, I’ll sit down. Whatever. Tell me what you want first.”

Sisbell remained silent for a few moments before letting out a dark chuckle.

“Okay. I apologize. I don’t know anything about your personalities, aside from Iska’s. I just wanted to test the waters and see how you would react... Let me discuss something with you. Is that okay, Commander Mismis?”

“Ye-yu-huh?!” She practically jumped out of her seat.

She looked like she’d been called on by a superior.

...Oh, this is bad.

...She’s frozen from nerves.

Iska couldn’t exactly blame her. A witch with unclear motives had waltzed in from out of nowhere and demanded to negotiate with them. No wonder her mind went blank.

“This is bad. Sit down, Commander. You’re going to call attention to yourself. Hey, Iska.”

“...Roger.” Iska raised his hand, nodding at Nene and Jhin. “I’ll hear you out. Does that work?” he asked Sisbell.

“Of course!”

“...You sound happy.”

“Think nothing of it. I just prefer speaking with an acquaintance... Ahem. It’s been two days since I’ve seen you, Iska.”

Another comment that raised suspicion.

Iska resisted the urge to sigh.

Sisbell possessed the power of Illumination. Even among astral powers, it was rare to be able to access the time-space continuum and reproduce events of the past.

...Even if we didn’t see each other yesterday...I bet she used her powers to peek at our activities.

After all, she had figured out which hotel they were staying at. It was safe to assume she had seen all their actions.

“I thought you’d already left the country. But you were here all this time.”

Her situation was different than theirs. After all, she was a princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty. She knew she was being targeted and that Lord Mask was there.

He assumed she would go into hiding immediately.

“I’ll be leaving as soon as possible after this.” The witch princess smiled at him. “And I will be taking you all with me.”

The strawberry shake came.

Sisbell handed the server a tip. Until the employee had returned to the kitchen, not a single one of them had been able to utter a word.

Bringing them along? What was she talking about?

“What do you mean? You must know we’re not going to become your prisoners without a fight.”

“I would like to hire you as my guards.”

“...What?” Jhin’s eyebrows knitted together. He scowled from irritation and bewilderment.

“I don’t understand. Did you just say you wanted the four of us to become your guards?”

“Yes.” Sisbell nodded, smiling innocently. “I would like to make my way to the palace in Nebulis. And I want you to eliminate the astral corps that attack me on the journey.”

“No thanks. Let’s go, boss, Iska, Nene. We’ll be in deep shit if word gets to headquarters that we’re chatting with the enemy.”

“Liar.”

“...Excuse me?”

“You don’t want headquarters to know your captain is a witch.”

The princess looked at Mismis—a newly minted witch—her eyes zeroing in on the hidden astral crest on the Commander’s shoulder.

“Isn’t that right, Iska?” asked Sisbell.

“...So you knew.”

It wasn’t surprising that Sisbell would figure it out with her ability.

He could even think of the likely case when she would have found out.

“Tell me. Did you discover this when the Object attacked two days ago?”

“Astral power in one, two, three, four, five...six. Tally complete.”

With Lord Mask and his four underlings, that made five.

With Mismis, that made six.

The Witch Hunter—an Imperial machine—had registered her as a witch.

“Yes. That was when I was certain. Commander Mismis, let me take a guess: You weren’t born with the astral crest on your shoulder, right?”

“Uh.” The petite captain shivered.

“It should be impossible for astral mages to be born in the Empire these days. And it’s futile to hide your crest with Imperial medical bandages—they fail to conceal astral energy.”

Sisbell palmed an adhesive. It was the same as the one she had placed on Mismis’s shoulder earlier.

“It is a specialized material called ‘Nebula.’ Unlike Imperial bandages, this material actually prevents astral energy from leaking out.”

“...Yes,” Iska agreed in a way that would get through to Mismis.

He now understood what the witch princess was offering to compensate them for guarding her.

...That’s her move, huh.

...We would kill for that right now. We’d do almost anything.

A method to hide her witch-hood didn’t exist in the Empire, but it did in the Sovereignty.

“To thank you for being my guards, I will give you information on how to properly conceal an astral crest. With this, you won’t have anything to fear, even in Imperial territory.”

They were silent.

Iska and Nene pursed their lips. Mismis was still holding her left shoulder as her lips quivered.

“I’m not asking you to betray the Empire. The ones after me are astral mages. Isn’t it reasonable for Imperial forces to fight against them, Commander Mismis?”

“...Th-that’s umm...”

“You could call this an armistice—a proper transaction. This is—”

“Stop right there.”

“Okay, that’s it.”

Iska and Nene had spoken up at the same time.

Their synchronicity wasn't planned, and it caught Sisbell by surprise.

They were all thinking the same thing.

"Okay, Sisbell. No need to go any further. The deal is done."

"Huh?! W-wait, Iska?!" protested their commander.

"As subordinates, we agree." Iska didn't look at the captain, who was trying to grab his attention, instead turning to where Nene was sitting. "Right?"

"Uh-huh. I know your position puts you in a difficult place to express approval, Commander. You can't agree to guarding the enemy to get this adhesive." Nene nodded. "So we'll volunteer ourselves. No problems there."

"...B-but Nene!" Mismis protested.

"We've got some non-negotiable conditions. We won't do anything that would hurt the Empire." Jhin sounded somber as he stared down at the princess sipping her strawberry shake. "If we end up in a situation where the Imperial forces are out for you, we'll let you die."

"Fine with me."

"We'll do two things. We'll travel with you, and we'll get involved only when the astral corps attack you."

"Sounds good."

"One last thing: We have just fifty days off duty. That's the amount of time we can be outside Imperial territory. So we have thirty days—tops—to accompany you."

"I understand."

"...I never would have expected this vacation to turn out this way."

With one hand on his forehead, Jhin peeked around.

It was a bit late for breakfast. Tourists scarcely dotted the café, and the staff didn't appear rushed as they bussed the tables.

"This is sensitive information, so I would normally suggest saving this until

we're back in the hotel room...but I'm going to ask you now. *Why are you being targeted ?*"

"....."

"How do you expect us to properly guard you? They'll base their strategy on this reason. And it'll change how we devise our counterattacks."

The witch princess went silent.

Iska caught her looking at him for a brief moment. It didn't seem like his eyes were playing tricks on him.

"...Our nation is no monolith."

She was deliberate in her phrasing, choosing each of her words with care.

"I am a retainer at the palace , but there are factions and differing opinions within it. Isn't it the same case in the Empire? One person is uplifted, and the other is kicked down. There is someone who profits from getting in my way."

"...You mean Lord Mask?"

"Yes. And let me tell you the cold, hard truth about the future." Sisbell looked over the tense commander. "If I don't return to the palace, full-scale war will break out between the Sovereignty and the Empire in the next year—and continue until one side is totally crushed."

"—FU— ?!"

"Shh! Commander!" Nene clamped her hand over Mismis's mouth in a panic.

Mismis was moments away from shouting *full-scale war* in the café.

"It would end with the total annihilation of the planet, which is why I want to return to the palace as soon as possible... Hm, I guess I should have told you this first. You might have needed to mentally prepare yourself."

"Wh-what are you talking about...?" Mismis's lips trembled. "I can't pretend not to hear this as a captain..."

"We can continue this conversation somewhere more private. It would be bad if someone overheard. Let's go to your room." Sisbell got to her feet, picking up the check and sauntering over to the cash register. "Oh, I got this. Consider it a

token of our friendship.”

“We didn’t order anything. The only thing to pay for is your strawberry shake.”

“...Let me say one thing.” Her long hair and dress billowed.

The youngest princess of Nebulis fixed her eyes on Jhin.

“I was nervous talking to an Imperial unit. My throat was parched. This didn’t even do the trick.”

“I was just trying to say the check is obviously yours to—”

“All right. Let us be on our way.”

“Listen .”

Iska came to a realization.

...They’re a terrible match... Judging from their personalities alone, they’ll never be on the same page.

The princess marched to the beat of her own drum. Jhin was rational. They would never see eye-to-eye.

“Jhin, you okay?” asked Iska.

“I don’t have any qualms. But I might be stressed.” The sniper stormed forward, cutting through the air with his shoulders. “We’ve always had one problem child—the boss. Now, we have another one. But I can deal if it’s just for thirty days.”

4

The Paradise of Witches. The Nebulis Sovereignty had been founded by Nebulis I, the younger twin of the Founder. The royal family broke into three divided bloodlines to reign over the nation.

The current queen came from the House of Lou, which had continued to fight the Empire while limiting casualties in the astral corps.

The House of Zoa were extremists, ready to destroy the Empire at whatever

cost.

The House of Hydra were moderates, serving any queen as her advisors.

Three royal lines.

The three families each resided in their own spires. The home base of Lou was the Star Spire.

It housed the queen's bedroom and Alice's own room, though the princess was in a different part of the spire.

"Lady Alice, should you be hanging out here?"

"I'm on a bed. It's fine."

"Sorry. Let me rephrase: You're in someone else's room."

"It's fine. She's in another country anyway."

In Sisbell's room, Alice was sprawled on her bed without permission, looking up at the ceiling.

...Well, she'll find out when she uses her astral powers... But we were able to talk to each other in Alsamira.

How long had it been since she had talked to her sister face-to-face? Her sister had ignored her when they ran into each other in the hallways or otherwise excused herself in her emotionless way.

...I was a little relieved... I could never guess what she was thinking. I was scared of her until now.

Though Sisbell was another opponent in the conclave, she was also family. There was nothing weird about wanting to talk to her younger sister.

What did her younger sister think of that?

"Do you know who this Imperial soldier is?"

It had been a miscalculation. Everything had been.

She had been hell-bent on making sure no one knew about her relationship with Iska. Even if there had been an eyewitness account of their meetup, she believed no one would recognize his face.

“...Gah.”

“Lady Alice, what is the matter? I can almost hear the gloom in your sigh.”

“Hey, Rin? Where do you think Sisbell is? What do you think she’s up to?”

“We’ll know in time. The queen’s own guards are heading off to protect her.”

The attendant was curt—inoffensive and objective.

However, Alice had a bad feeling in her gut.

“...You don’t think she’s with Iska, right?”

“I have made no mistake in judgment.”

“I will not give up until I make you into my subordinate.”

She practically jumped out of bed. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Lady Alice! Are you in your right mind?!”

“I’m the picture of composure. But what was that about how she was going to make him her subordinate? Iska is *my* rival. If she tries to get in our way...!”

Sisbell had looked at him with glistening eyes. It certainly wasn’t an expression that she had ever shown Alice. She refused to let that slide! No more dancing to *her* tune!

“I can’t believe a princess would try to make a subordinate out of an enemy soldier! Who even thinks of something so contemptuous? We’re supposed to be defeating the Empire!”

“Lady Alice, I believe you did the same thing...”

“Rin.”

“Sorry. Please do go on.”

“Anyway! Iska would never be won over by the Sovereignty. I know that better than anyone. So what’s with that?!”

He would never join forces with an astral mage.

That was why they had to settle things—Alice and Iska, a mage and a swordsman.

“I see him as one of my enemies. I won’t make allowances for him if I meet him in the battlefield. I told him he was a rival, meaning he needs to be prepared for me to attack.”

“Perfectly put, Lady Alice. We cannot identify with him.”

“...Yes. All Iska and I can do is battle.”

A rivalry meant the two could not get along.

The label also implied that they would inevitably duel against each other. No time for aiding and abetting the other party. Their only future together was for one of them to fall in the battlefield.

“I know that about myself...but...my sister...” She ground her teeth.

In her rage, Alice didn’t feel the chilled air that radiated from her body.

“Maybe I really need to give her a scolding.”

“Lady Alice?! P-please do get a hold over yourself! The room is beginning to freeze over!”

“Ack!”

The window was pure white.

The curtains were solid, with icicles dangling from them.

“I understand, but please approach this with grace. The people think the three Lou sisters are close.”

“...You’re right.”

Of course, there was a political reason for that.

In the public eye, Alice even had held Sisbell’s hand while wearing a big smile—not that her younger sister would exchange a single word with her once they returned to the castle.

“...Whatever.”

She would quell her emotions.

She let in a slow inhale before letting it all out.

“I don’t believe she’s serious about asking Iska to work for her. I hope.” She

glanced at the window of the bedroom.

Glaring in the direction of a distant desert, Alice sighed.

CHAPTER 2



Countdown to the Sister War

1

“We’ve crossed the borders, my lady.”

“Did you all hear that? We’ve exited the borders of Alsamira. Who knows what assassins are lying in wait? Be on guard.”

A loop bus plowed through the sprawling desert that surrounded the independent state of Alsamira. It was a lawless place, known for being the home to a gigantic beast, the basilisk. A territory beyond the scope of the human eye.

However, their hypervigilance was not directed toward the beast itself, but rather toward other human beings.

“Look out for the masked man’s group.”

Sisbell sounded like she was making an in-cabin announcement as a crew member. She must have been trying to project her voice since she was sitting with the four from the Imperial unit.

“I don’t think there will be many enemies, but I imagine the ones we do encounter will be elite fighters. They’re planning on apprehending me, and—”

“I feel like I’m listening to a broken record.”

Lounging on the leather seat, Jhin sounded bored out of his mind.

“You already told us two days ago at our hotel. And yesterday at *your* hotel. Once is more than enough, and the third time is not working its charm.”

“I-it’s important! It deserves to be repeated!” Sisbell retorted, pouting in frustration. “We were still coming at each other with questions yesterday. We need time to review!”

“They’re traitors of the Nebulis Sovereignty, hoping to overthrow the queen

and wage war on the Empire or something.”

“Y-yes!”

“But we don’t have a way to verify the validity of that claim.” He seemed to dismiss everything she said. “I mean, who knows if you’re the traitor trying to overthrow the current ruler? Either way, I don’t care to learn too much about the enemy. To us, your queen is the leader of our opponents.”

“.....”

“If we’re sloppy, the headquarters will catch wind of this. I don’t plan on taking on that risk.”

“...I suppose you wouldn’t.” The youngest princess of Nebulis bit her lip.

“Fair point,” muttered the older gentleman sitting behind the wheel. “We made this deal for a trade. It isn’t based on trust. We’re only going to tell you what’s relevant to you as guards.”

That was Shuvalts. The princess’s chaperone.

He was an aged man with tidy gray hair, fitted in his usual slim black suit, which had not a single wrinkle. *Shrewd* would be the best word to describe him.

He was keeping an eye out for Lord Mask’s dispatched pursuers from behind the wheel.

...Is he basically Sisbell’s “Rin”? ...I heard he’s her only confidant in the palace.

However, he fell short when it came to fighting. In contrast to Alice’s guard, Rin, Shuvalts’s astral power wasn’t suited to combat.

“My lady, this arrangement is transactional. No place for emotions.”

“...I know that, Shuvalts.” Sisbell took a deep breath. “Anyway, I’m just trying to say I trust you to eliminate the assassins.”

“Commander? Are you cool with that?”

“Hm? Uh, t-totally!” The captain righted herself in a fluster. “B-but this is the first and last time! Please don’t continue to interact with us once this is over!”

“Of course. But I’ll make full use of you. We’re just business partners across borders.” Sisbell nodded, seeming pleased with herself. She made a leisurely lap

around the bus.

“Iska? Do you know what this means?”

“What?”

“You’re my subordinate—starting today!”

The witch princess plopped herself between Mismis and Iska. She snaked her arm around his bicep.

“This must be what they call ‘destiny.’ Foretold by the stars! I think we will have a good working relationship.”

“...Um.”

“Through thick and thin. When the way forward becomes difficult, we’ll face the obstacles together.”

“Um, I thought I was your guard.”

Since when did he become her subordinate?

Didn’t “business partners” necessitate they were on equal ground?

“Oh right. Sorry.”

She had to be doing this on purpose.

Sisbell’s impish smile implied she knew more than she let on. Also, he wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, but it seemed that she kept finding excuses to touch him. Right now, with her arm around him, she was pressing her chest against him through her thin dress. There was no mistaking the feel of her breasts, though they seemed to be on the small side.

She was looking at him with those pleading eyes of hers.

“You know you’re welcome to be my subordinate at any time.”

“Hold it right there!” Mismis objected.

“No way, no how!” Nene roared.

Their protests echoed through the bus.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what is this witch saying?! Iska is *my* subordinate!”

“Oh? But aren’t you a witch, Commander Mismis?”

“Iska is part of my circle! You can’t just steal him away from me!”

“I am, too, technically. I don’t see the issue.”

The three of them stared one another down.

Sisbell was the first to withdraw. “...I’m confident in you. As you can see, my only ally is Shuvalts.”

No one voiced any objections.

Jhin had proposed that Unit 907 not stick their noses in Sisbell’s business—be it anything related to her goals or her status. Commander Mismis had consented.

...Jhin positioned it as something to protect us from being caught by headquarters...but it also means Sisbell can continue hiding her identity.

The youngest princess. Of the goals Iska knew, she had two lofty ones.

First, to protect the life of her mother, the queen.

Second, to reveal the traitors plotting to overthrow the nation. With her astral powers, it was possible, with time.

He was the only one who knew about that.

Mismis, Jhin, and Nene had decided not to probe into her affairs.

...Jhin made the right choice... I mean, it’s the same reason why they don’t know about my relationship with Alice.

Any members of the Empire with ties to the Sovereignty would face capital punishment. Even Iska had been sentenced to life imprisonment, and he was a Saint Disciple with unique skills. Headquarters showed no mercy to traitors.

“It’s always so hot.” The princess fanned herself with an open palm. “Traversing the desert is not easy. I already had enough of this heat on my way here. If my older sister, Alice, was here, it would be cooler.”

“Hm?”

“Ah, nothing!” Sisbell yelped when Jhin shot her a pointed gaze. He picked up

on everything.

“Iska, you seem awfully calm.”

“Yeah, I mean, the AC is working, and...”

Why was Sisbell clinging to him if she was so hot? All the other seats were empty.

“...Why don't you sit somewhere cooler?”

“No.” She turned her nose up, acting like a snobby kid.

Now that he thought about it, Iska didn't know how old she was.

Based on appearances, she must have been a year or two younger than Nene.

“How old are you?”

“I'm sixteen. Seventeen this year.”

“...Oh? Then that means I'm a year older than you.”

...I feel like I remember...having that conversation with Alice.

Alice's younger sister was next to him.

She had the Founder's blood. A purebred. A daughter of the queen.

She was the ideal hostage for peace negotiations. She was the type of witch that Iska had desperately searched for in the battlefields. And here she was, defenselessly snuggling up to him.

...It wouldn't be strange for me to restrain her as an Imperial soldier... But I can't. We need that adhesive for Mismis.

They had negotiated this working partnership.

That was why there was no choice for him but to put up with this attention. He hadn't grown fond of her or anything.

Anything was fair game once this guarding business was over. If they ever crossed paths on a battlefield, he would not hesitate to apprehend the same girl whom he was now helping escape.

It was the same with Alice. In the trenches, he would have no choice but to fight her.

“Sisbell, let me make one thing clear.”

Iska looked square into the eyes of the girl next to him. He needed to cut all ties.

“Once we’re done guarding you, you and I will have nothing to do with each other. If we encounter each other in the battlefield, we’re enemies. You understand that, right?”

“Why, of course.” She nodded calmly, though her voice seemed peppy. “Once you’re done guarding me,’ huh? That means you’re my ally until then! I see right through you!”

“.....”

It had the opposite effect.

He was trying to set some boundaries. But she had found the loophole.

“It’s fine... Even if it’s just for this short period...”

“Sisbell?”

“...I’m grateful. I’m glad you’re around.”

He could hardly hear her.

In fact, he doubted anyone else—not Commander Mismis nor Nene nor Jhin—could make out this pained statement.

It was almost inaudible, but he could tell from the way her shoulders moved against his that she spoke, and with feeling.

“I’ll keep my promise. If you can get me to the palace, I will give you the adhesives. Please just protect me...”

“—”

He was at a loss. He couldn’t put up a fight. Now he couldn’t push her away from clinging onto him. For the duration of his duty, she had the right to it.

...She must be so anxious... And what she said was from the heart. I know.

Commander Mismis and Nene had started to look at her threateningly.

The glint in their eyes was so sharp that it even made him afraid.

“You see, I can’t say no...,” Iska tried to protest in the smallest voice and sighed.

2

The highway stretched past the desert.

Their deliberate detour along the road between neutral cities added four hours to their trip.

“My lady.”

“.....”

“Please wake up.”

“—Eep?!”

The girl bolted awake after the elderly man in the driver’s seat called out to her. She stood up from her seat next to Iska, looking around the vehicle as she came back to her senses.

“Uh... Are we near the border?”

“We’re at the parking lot of the Highway Oasis—the HWO. It’s a pit stop with hotels and restaurants for people who use long-distance buses. I believe it is your first time here, my lady.”

Outside the vehicle, the sky was already dark. Pointing out the window, Shualts got out of the driver’s seat.

“I had to avoid the shortest route to the Sovereignty, which would draw the attention of the Zoa. And the streets after dark come with their own dangers. With the beasts roaming the roads, I thought it would be best for us to stop at the HWO.”

“Good thinking, Shualts. I’m feeling hungry, too.”

Sisbell looked toward the restaurants across the parking lot.

“Let’s go, Iska. There are many restaurants to choose from. What do you want to eat?”

“Wherever you want to go. We’re your guards after all.”

“Oh!” She sounded moved, forcibly gripping Iska’s hand. “So you’ll accompany me. This is our fate! You’re practically confessing you’re my subordinate!”

“...Seems like someone got back their energy after their nap.”

“I slept like a baby, thanks to you!” She jerked on his hand, pulling him along.

When she had been snoring gently next to him during the drive, Iska had gotten the impression that she was sweet. But now, she gave off the air of a confident aristocrat.

“If you’re feeling better, could you let go of my hand soon?”

“Never.”

It would have been better for him to remain silent. She squeezed his hand harder than ever.

“This is a mission. This is a mission. This is a mission...”

“Hey, boss? I can feel a murderous vibe from you.”

“We’re guards. We’re guards. We’re guards...”

“Hey, Nene? I think she’s rubbing off on you.”

Two pairs of bloodshot eyes flashed red.

They were trying to warn the witch to step away from Iska. Unfortunately, Sisbell remained blissfully unaware, showing no indication that she noticed them.

“Where do you want to go?” The princess clung onto Iska’s arm.

She was acting as if she were his younger sister, attached at the hip.

“Oh, I know! Guess my favorite food, as proof of our friendship. We’ll have that for dinner.”

“You want me to guess?”

“Hee-hee. I see you’re struggling. If it’s too hard, I can make it multiple choice.”

“...Pasta.”

“What?! No way! That’s correct!” Her mouth was agape. “How did you know?”

“Call it a hunch.”

So the sisters shared favorites. Iska concealed his little smile, walking through the parking lot.

...I wonder what Alice is up to... She must have returned to the Sovereignty. I imagine she’s having trouble dealing with everything.

Nebulis was no monolith—even among the queen’s daughters.

“Isn’t she your little sister?”

“Yes, but only one of us can become queen.”

The sisters were keeping each other in check.

Alice didn’t want her younger sister to know about her many meetings with an Imperial soldier.

Sisbell was weary of her older sister as she searched for the traitor who was scheming with the Empire.

And Iska was the only one who knew all of this. Their enemy.

It was ironic. They couldn’t confide in each other because they were going up against each other for the throne.

...Not that it’s any of my business... It concerns our nemesis. Nothing for an Imperial soldier to fret over.

He couldn’t find himself getting *too* involved, even if he couldn’t help but notice that their favorite foods were the same, even if he could sense the unbreakable bond between them that the sisters themselves were oblivious to.

“Hm? Is something the matter, Iska? What was the sigh for?”

“Because I felt like it...” Iska answered, turning away from the witch princess.

3

In the Star Spire of the palace in the Nebulis Sovereignty.

Alice always looked forward to gazing out of her balcony at the night sky. It was one of her little pleasures before going to bed in Sion, the Jewelry Box of Bells.

“...Another day for the books, huh.”

Against the black celestial sphere, the stars glistened like gems overturned from a treasure chest. There were too many constellations and shooting stars to count, dripping from the heavens to the horizon.

“Oof, it’s cold...”

The wind chilled her to the core as she wore nothing but a thin nightgown. Goosebumps arose on her skin and she began to shiver.

...I’m fine this way... It clears my head. She leaned onto the balcony’s handrail and exhaled.

“I wonder what Sisbell is doing right now...”

The queen had dispatched two of her guards the day before. At the earliest, they would reach Alsamira this evening or tomorrow morning.

Until then, Sisbell was basically defenseless.

She felt uneasy that Sisbell only had her chaperone, Shuvalts, with her. If something like an Object developed by the Empire were dispatched, her life would be in danger.

...No. The Zoa are more dangerous... They would try restraining her on suspicion of treason.

The three families all had the authority of inquisition.

When a member of any of the clans was accused of treason, the clans had to “rinse” themselves—meaning it was up to the royal family to capture their own kin.

“That’s the last resort. Since Sisbell’s situation is in the gray, they shouldn’t be able to make a move...”

The House of Zoa had already let an unmistakable opportunity slip by them—several days ago, when Sisbell and Iska had made contact.

Had the Zoa witnessed that encounter, Alice and the queen would not have been able to protect her.

"I wonder who this boy standing next to you could be."

"Wait, Lord Mask! I'm not colluding with the enemy."

At that moment, the Object had been a blessing in disguise.

Lord Mask had withdrawn because he had determined it would disservice the House of Zoa if things got out of control outside his territory.

"But it doesn't dissolve any suspicions surrounding Sisbell. If I was in their position, I would—"

"Lady Alice."

In her housekeeping clothes, Rin had come out onto the balcony, whipped by the cold wind.

"I apologize for encroaching on your space as you were about to retire."

"What's the matter?"

"You have a visitor. I wanted to see if I should turn them down."

A visitor? At this hour?

From the balcony, she could see the downtown area was already dark. Alice was already in her sleepwear, clearly immodest for appearing in front of someone. The high-grade silk was sheer enough to expose her peachy skin.

"Turn them away. I do not intend to entertain someone visiting a princess this late at night... Who is it?"

"It's Lord Mask."

".....Wait."

She was at her wit's end. Her head felt heavy.

She shouldn't have asked. She should have just refused without knowing the visitor's name.

"...Rin, what do you make of this?"

"He has a knack for annoying people." The attendant did not even try to hide

her disgust. “Lady Alice, you’re a lady—even before you’re a princess. It’s rude for him to visit your room at this hour. If he wasn’t the figurehead of Zoa, I would have kicked him in the backside.”

“You’re right.”

“However, I imagine he’s armed with an excuse. He would insist it’s urgent. I’m certain he has something prepared, but you have the right to refuse him, Lady Alice.”

“...If I turn him away, I feel I won’t be able to sleep through the night.”

“I believe that’s what he was betting on.”

What was Lord Mask planning to talk to her about? It had to be some sort of trick. However, Alice was confident that she would indeed lose sleep over it if she didn’t hear him out. In that case, she would rather get it over with.

...It seems he has read into me... He is the strategist of the House of Zoa, after all.

“Fine. Rin, prepare tea and snacks. You do not need to prepare any for me.” Alice turned around without waiting for a reply, heading from the balcony to her living room.

She pulled out a thick dressing gown to wear as she took a seat in front of the table.

“I will show him to your room.” Rin started to open the door.

Outside was a man who looked well suited to his usual mask and black clothes.

“Pardon me. I must apologize for my discourteous behavior to a young maiden.”

“You mean maidens .”

“Hm?”

“Rin is one, too.”

“Oh, I apologize. That’s right. Rin is a veritable maiden herself.”

On the other side of the door was the most gifted man among the Zoa,

standing in the hallway without attempting to take a single step into Alice's room.

"I'm not used to visiting someone of the opposite sex late at night. Alice, please stay there. Rin, no need for tea."

How shameless! After touching a nerve with this inappropriate late-night visit, he had still managed to devise a way to appear gentlemanly. What a hypocrite!

"What brings you here?"

"It's about your younger sister. I was just speaking to her majesty about her."

"...About Sisbell?"

Alice had anticipated this conversation. In fact, his straightforward approach was making her suspicious.

"Let me be frank. Are you aware of the possibility that Sisbell is colluding with the Empire?"

"No."

There was no hesitation. Alice wasn't lying.

While her sister had been involved with Iska in that incident from a year ago, Alice knew she wasn't scheming with the Empire behind their backs. Of course, the House of Zoa would benefit from fabricating this charge.

"You think she has ties to the Empire? What do you mean by that?"

"I was disappointed to find that was the case. Sisbell was in contact with an Imperial soldier in Alsamira."

"...And?"

"Her majesty remarked there was no possibility of that."

"Naturally."

There was no way her mother would have acknowledged it. After all, she had secretly sent guards out yesterday to protect her beloved daughter.

"I hope these suspicions are groundless."

"Is that really what you think?"

“Of course. But I can’t shake my suspicions. Sisbell will need to show evidence of her innocence. If this keeps up, the people will lose faith in the royal family. I pray she returns as soon as possible...However...” He sighed from behind the mask. *“She absconded.”*

“...I beg your pardon?”

“It seems your sister is already out of Alsamira. According to the queen, anyway.”

“That isn’t strange. She had considered that possibility.”

As far as Alice was concerned, it was normal.

Sisbell had been attacked by the Object. Her encounter with Iska had been seen by Lord Mask. That was enough to compel her to hide away in a neighboring country with her attendant Shuvalts.

“What are you implying, Lord Mask?”

“I was thinking someone might have been aiding Sisbell. That is why I came tonight.”

The man had a habit of flicking his fingertip against his hard mask. It seemed to indicate he was trying to make the other person accept the unreasonable.

“To talk about the *Imperial forces* .”

“What?!”

“A total of five people witnessed Sisbell meeting alone with an enemy soldier. Immediately after, she concealed her whereabouts. Isn’t it rational to think she has the help of the Imperial forces?”

“There’s no way.”

Again, Alice was not lying.

...Sisbell had been captured by their army before. The one who had saved her was Iska... And she must begrudge them for their behavior.

In this moment, Alice was the only one who was in the know, and there was no proof, which made things difficult. To the House of Zoa, this was a golden opportunity to charge the Lou of heinous crimes, since they couldn’t disclose

the truth.

It was their chance to eliminate the House of Lou and supplant them in the conclave.

“Regardless, we’re even more suspicious of Sisbell, now that she’s gone into hiding.”

“...I assume you said the same thing to the queen?”

“Yes, and she couldn’t deny it. With the situation being what it is...”

What—?

Before she could protest, the corner of his mouth curled up.

“We’re forming a search party for Sisbell—a joint effort between the Zoa and Lou. I will be the supervisor for our family. As for yours...”

“Are you telling me to do it? Did you come to ask me that?”

“That’s right. Let’s work together to find Sisbell.”

Lord Mask had subtly achieved just cause for this search party. Yet, it was easy to guess his true intentions.

...He wants me to become the supervisor because he thinks her own sister would be able to sniff out her location sooner... And he wants me to hand over that information to him.

It grated on her nerves. Had she not been standing in sight of him, she would have sighed.

“I consent. Are we done here?”

“Mhmm. It’s getting late. Well, Alice, Rin, sweet dreams.”

“—Yes.”

Alice knew her dreams would be far from sweet. She stopped herself from telling him off, watching as he left the room behind.

“Rin.” She waited until her attendant had closed the door, balling her hands into fists. “...I hate losing. I cannot let him continue to seize the initiative.”

“I understand.”

“Lend me your knowledge. We’ll make every member of the House of Zoa pale in fright.”

4

In the Paradise of Witches, the Nebulis Sovereignty.

Its eighth state, Liesbaden, sat at the border of the Sovereignty, prospering from trade with the neutral cities. It was known as the birthplace of literary masters.

The roads were beautifully maintained, and people sauntered through them. Groups of women packed the outdoor seating area of the café overlooking the plaza, indulging in a long lunch.

“Something on your mind, Iska?” Sisbell stopped on the sidewalk, looking up at him. “Do you want to eat there?”

“...No. I was just thinking that cafés are the same in any country.”

Be it the mechanical utopia or the Paradise of Witches, civilizations were based around technology and astral power, respectively.

Though they were regarded as polar opposites, the Sovereignty had been founded by rebels living in the Empire until just a century ago.

...Our foundations are the same. Even the language and shopping areas... The only glaring difference is our currency.

Well, there was one other thing.

It was invisible to the naked eye, but those strolling the streets were witches and sorcerers.

Even the young women working part-time at the café would be feared by the Empire. Even the mildest girls could use astral power to overwhelm an Imperial soldier.

...That used to be normal in the Empire until a century ago... There was even that incident where an astral mage rampaged, attacking her nonmage boyfriend with her powers.

Humans had no way of resisting.

Suffering from the mortal wound, the man must have stopped seeing her as his lover, instead categorizing her as one of those beastly “witches.” This was why the Empire had a history of persecuting mages.

“...Is it okay for Imperial soldiers to cross the borders without a hitch?”

“I told you. There’s nothing to worry about with me here.” Sisbell was outfitted in unisex sweat clothes, pulling the hat over her eyes and hiding behind fake glasses.

Iska was wearing a thin T-shirt—his usual neutral-city getup. He wasn’t walking around with his two astral swords. Nothing about him gave away that he was from the Empire.

“The borders of this state have top examiners. All of them would recognize me and Shuvalts, just from our faces. It’s like we get the VIP treatment.”

“Top examiners, huh? And they let you in based on face alone...?”

“I obviously present proof of my lineage as a princess. Once they verify me, it would be rude to look too much into my guards.”

Sisbell and Shuvalts had the means to identify themselves.

For better or for worse, Commander Mismis could pass the astral trail, too. Iska, Nene, and Jhin, though, were drenched in their own sweat until they passed the checkpoint.

“And on the off chance they demanded we go through the trial?”

“I would have told them to back off. It’s a faux pas to doubt a princess’s guards. Of course, had they figured it out, it would have been a big mess...”

It would have come to light that Sisbell had invited in Imperial soldiers. That would put even the queen’s position at risk.

“I’m desperate. I must get to the palace as soon as possible. The palace is a den of monsters right now. I cannot leave the queen alone.”

Sisbell’s tone made it sound like it was no big deal, but this was something Iska was hearing from her for the first time.

“What monsters?”

He wasn't used to hearing that word. Large beasts like basilisks were considered “monsters,” but he was having a hard time imagining one prowling around the queen's palace.

Was it jargon for a witch or sorcerer?

“...Oh, I guess I haven't told you.” Sisbell had grown quiet as they walked on the sidewalk.

With the hat covering her eyes, she shook her head.

“Sorry. My tongue slipped. It doesn't concern your duties.”

“Got it.”

“...You know, I'm a little tired from walking since morning.” The princess stopped, pointing toward a cake shop down the path. “Let's stop for a drink there.”

“You don't think they'll mind serving an Imperial soldier?”

“You're the one who said you wanted to see the streets of the Sovereignty, Iska. If this was the central state, I would have advised against it, but this is some random shop in Liesbaden.”

“So it's not a big deal if they find out I'm from the Empire?”

“Exactly. This might be the first time that one of you has observed the Sovereignty. Aren't you bursting with curiosity?” The princess smiled mischievously. “It must be your first time seeing this townscape, even as a former Saint Disciple.”

“You're right.”

Sisbell showed no sign of having noticed Iska's awkward response.

...I guess she never imagined that her own sister had abducted me and brought me to the thirteenth state as a captive.

He had experience traveling to the Sovereignty, though he didn't know much about the townscape since he had been confined to the presidential suite in a hotel at the time.

...But Captain Mismis, Nene, and Jhin know more than me...after spending a few days in Alcatroz to save me.

Iska was the only one in the dark. That was why he had gone out wandering alone, leaving the other three in the rooms with Shuvalts.

“It would be no laughing matter if they took advantage of you in an unfamiliar space. Ask me anything.”

“I’ve got a few questions. Do you have astral energy detectors?”

There were, installed all over Imperial towns to detect assassins from astral corps.

“Yes, but for a different purpose. They alert us about explosive amounts of power, not if they’re weak.”

“Which means they aren’t on the lookout for Imperial soldiers?”

“That’s for the checkpoint to figure out. Since Liesbaden was turned into a dependent state, there are many people here who are not astral mages.”

“Then what purpose do the detectors serve?”

“...Aren’t there people in the Empire who abuse guns?” The princess offered a pained smile.

She avoided a direct answer, but Iska had gotten the hint.

“Are they to detect crimes using astral power? For robberies and property damage and the like?”

“Yes. It’s unrealistic to assume every single powerful mage is an upstanding citizen. There used to be a stream of criminals, though there are fewer now. There were prison towers holding the criminals, and if I were to give an infamous example...”

“You mean Alcatroz?”

“You never let me down, former Saint Disciple. You have intelligence on the Sovereignty.” Sisbell looked at him in admiration. “We call these criminals ‘witches’ and ‘sorcerers.’ The worst is someone named Salinger—whoops. Sorry, tangent. I’ve gone ahead and said too much.”

“.....”

Salinger. The transcendental sorcerer.

The name was still fresh in his memory. It made Iska audibly gulp.

“The third stage: the unification of humans and astral power.”

“On this planet, there have been only two people who have been able to attain that state by their own power. Both are true monsters. However, I will inevitably have the same one day.”

He didn't plan on figuring out what that meant.

Even though he boasted skill, the man had already been apprehended on Alice's order.

Iska doubted his ears when he heard Sisbell make her next claim.

“The police brigade is on patrol in every state of our country to pursue Salinger.”

“...What did you say?”

“It happened just the other day. Salinger wormed his way out of prison. My older sister happened to be in Alcatroz and stopped him once. But apparently it was a double he made with his powers. The cell was empty when they realized this.”

“.....”

“That's why our country is on alert, which works against us. After all, the police are everywhere, keeping an eye out... Hm, Iska?” Sisbell blinked her wide eyes. “What's wrong? Is something bothering you?”

“...A few things. But we have to keep our eye on the prize—and get to the central state.”

“You're right. We're just getting started.” Beyond her fake glasses, her eyes seemed to darken from nerves. “Since we passed the checkpoint, my location would have been relayed to the palace.”

“And to Lord Mask?”

“Yes. I can imagine him blocking our path to the palace. I plan on forcing my

way through, even if they try to stop us. I just need to get back.”

With Illumination, she would be able to uncover the identity of the traitor and conspirator who’d leaked to Lord Mask that Sisbell had gone to the independent state.

“Lord Mask?! Wh-why are you here...?”

“Just on a holiday. There shouldn’t be anything strange about that.”

There were two suspects.

According to Sisbell, they were both from the royal family. Iska didn’t ask for details. He had no intention of getting involved in the Sovereignty’s blood feud.

“Can I ask one more thing?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Aren’t your family members your allies?”

He had no idea what kind of influence the man named Lord Mask boasted in the palace. However, if Alice was protecting Sisbell, Iska couldn’t imagine Lord Mask laying a finger on her.

...I can’t reveal my connection with Alice...so I can only ask Sisbell about this in vague terms, though I think she’ll get the hint.

He wondered: Shouldn’t Sisbell have been trying to obtain protection through her older sister?

Sisbell could only chuckle in a self-deprecating way when she understood what he was asking.

“Only my mother. I still cannot trust my dear sister Alice.”

“Got it.”

“...Seems we’ve been talking for too long.” Sisbell stopped and turned on her heel.

They had gone far ahead, past the cake shop, their initial destination.

“Let’s go back.”

“To that shop?”

“No, to the hotel. I’ve kept Shuvalts waiting. Your unit must be eager for your return. I will forego the cake.”

She started to trudge down the road they’d come from.

“...Phew, it’s hot! I’m sweaty from walking. I must take a bath once we get back.”

“Maybe it’s the hat that’s making you feel warm?”

“I’m so hot under all this hair. It’s awful. I’m envious of short hair.” Sisbell tilted up the brim of her hat and sighed before entwining her arm around Iska’s bicep.

She acted like it was perfectly normal. She was casual about it, like they were a couple on a date.

She pushed her small chest against his arm.

“I feel better like this. Let’s go back to the hotel.”

“In this pose?!”

“It’s part of my strategy. The military police wouldn’t dream of their princess pretending to be on a date...right, Iska?” She spoke in her cutest voice, grinning in satisfaction and suggestively looking at him. “Just so you know, I haven’t given up on making you my subordinate.”

“Let’s get out of here before it gets too gloomy.”

“Hey! Are you listening to me?! Hey, Iska! I’m talking to you!”

Turning away from Sisbell, Iska stormed through unfamiliar land.

INTERMISSION



Whose Is He?

1

“They found her?! In Liesbaden?!”

Water sprayed into the air. Like a dolphin leaping out of the sea, Alice had dramatically stood up from the bathtub filled with milky water.

“W-wait, Lady Alice! You’ll get my clothes wet!” Rin kicked the soaked towel to the side as she rushed out of the tub as well.

She was the one who had disclosed the newest report about Sisbell just now.

“My clothes...”

“This is serious. I need to get out of here. Fill me in when I’m dressed.”

Alice stood in front of the fogged mirror. Her skin was flushed pink. Her wet hair clung to her naked form. She could have been a painting.

“...Being a princess can be so annoying. Why do I have to care about my skin during a crisis?”

“You don’t need to check yourself in the mirror. I can assure you: You’re beautiful.”

Rin wasn’t focused on her skin. Her eyes were locked onto the princess’s chest.

Alice’s breasts rested weightily on her folded arms, the added support allowing them to maintain their plush, round shape.

“A marvel.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing... Phew. They’re quite something, Lady Alice...”

Rin had nothing to push up, even if she crossed her arms. It seemed she

wasn't all too pleased about this striking difference between them.

"All right, Lady Alice, please get dressed."

"Hold on. I need to dry myself off first."

In the dressing room, she used a towel to dry the water off her long, golden locks. While Rin prepared a change of clothes, Alice began to work on the rest of her body. This was normally a task for her attendant, but there was no time for that.

"It's fine. Just fill me in."

"There's only a small nugget of information that I can disclose. Before noon, Lady Sisbell passed through a checkpoint in the Sovereignty."

"And entered Liesbaden, I imagine." After she shimmied on her underwear, she passed her arm through the sleeve of her nightgown. "Just Sisbell and Shuvalts?"

"There were four people who seemed to be her guards. According to Lady Sisbell, they were mercenaries who she hired in Alsamira to help her cross the desert."

"...Seems reasonable."

It would have been a wise move. Sisbell must have considered the possibility of the House of Zoa lying in wait for her as instructed by Lord Mask.

"That's a relief. Now we know why Mother's guards missed her—so she was safe."

"Yes. I imagine she'll return to the central state soon, though the queen would like her to stay in Liesbaden."

"Does she want me to protect her? But that means being accompanied by some unsavory types."

"We're forming a search party for Sisbell—a joint effort between the Zoa and Lou. I will be the supervisor for our family."

"That's right. Let's work together to find Sisbell."

Lord Mask wouldn't allow Alice to search by herself.

“Even if I do find her, it will be trouble if Lord Mask is with me.”

“There will be a summoning of blood relatives.”

It was like Rin had that response ready.

“By the queen’s proclamation, the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra will have a conference tomorrow. As second-in-command of the House of Zoa, Lord Mask will not be exempted from the meeting.”

“...But doesn’t that include me?”

The heads of family and the second-in-command for each of them would attend. It had become customary for the queen and Alice to serve as representatives from their house. Even if they were trying to confine Lord Mask, Alice wouldn’t be able to skip out.

“Lady Elletear is here.”

“Oh! Right! My older sister is in the palace, so I don’t have to attend!”

Mother knew best. The woman who won the last conclave was still going strong.

“For all of tomorrow, the House of Zoa won’t be able to make a move. Lady Alice, you will lead the agents of our family and head to Liesbaden.”

“All right... To be honest, I don’t understand Sisbell, but she is my younger sister.”

Alice was obliged to run to her aid. If she left at sunrise, she would arrive at Liesbaden in the evening.

“I need to help her.”

Alice had no idea she would immediately regret that very statement.

2

Nebulis Sovereignty. Liesbaden. Ten o’clock in the evening.

The Felix Hotel provided a panoramic view of the shopping district, illuminated under neon lights. It was a luxury hotel used by wealthy tourists and

company socials.

In a room upstairs...

“I don’t exactly find this reassuring.”

It had been outfitted with antique furniture and an expensive sofa. There was enough space in the living room to fit a jumbo screen. Jhin leaned back in a chair.

“This is the bougiest I’ve felt in my entire life. Is this a joke?”

“It’s hard to relax,” Iska answered, lying down on top of the carpet.

The sofa was almost too luxurious to sit on. He felt far more comfortable where he was.

...I guess this is the second-most expensive experience in my life.

...Alice’s room tops the list. I mean, it was the presidential suite.

He had been a prisoner back then. So this was the first time Iska was staying in an extravagant room as a guest.

“Sisbell is in Room 902. We’ve got Rooms 901 and 903 to sandwich her. This hotel has its own alarms, and I doubt that the astral corps would cause a scene within the Sovereignty...”

He got up from the floor, turning around to see Commander Mismis and Nene. The girls were staying in Room 903 and looking glum on the sofa.

“Got it? You don’t have to be on edge, guys.”

“We’re not on edge, Iska,” Mismis said.

“What?”

“We’re just here to...”

“...Guard *you* , Iska,” Nene finished.

Their voices were oozing with uncharacteristic malice.

“Keeping watch so a *pest* doesn’t latch itself onto you, Iska.” Mismis gripped her handgun.

Nene was palming a handmade, high-power grenade.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this. I feel like that witch will sneak into your room in the middle of the night, claiming she needs a guard.”

“.....” He couldn’t deny that.

After all, she had snuck into his room in Alsamira.

“But I was going to sleep on that sofa as a bed...”

“Nuh-uh. Your bed is the frontline, Iska. If she steps foot in here, I’ll blow her to bits with this hand grenade!”

“And I’ll turn her into Swiss cheese with this handgun!”

The soldiers’ faces were earnest. If Sisbell tried to enter in the night, they weren’t kidding about launching a counterattack.

“C-could you please calm down?!”

“I’m serious!”

“Me too!”

Room 902.

A small nightlight illuminated the bedroom.

“.....”

Atop a bed that was much too large for her, Sisbell was silent as she wrapped herself in a thin terrycloth blanket.

She was naked underneath. She had no energy to change into her nightwear, much less dry her hair. She had crashed into bed from exhaustion.

...I’ve only just gotten back to my home country... Why am I so tired?

Maybe being on the run chipped away at her psyche.

“It’s just the beginning. The real plan is going to start now...”

She had successfully returned to Liesbaden. However, as soon as she crossed the border, her location had become known. First, there would be the assassins from the House of Zoa. There would be search parties proclaiming they were there to protect her.

It would involve the House of Lou, too—calling on the private forces of her two older sisters.

“I can’t let down my guard... My mother is the only person I can trust. One of my sisters has to be connected to the House of Zoa.”

Either one of them could be a traitor—perhaps even both. They must have been in league with *that monster* she’d seen by chance.

...Are they planning on shutting me up by capturing me? ...As if!

She had to strike before she was struck. She needed to expose the traitor among them, report her findings to the queen, and have them locked away.

That would protect the queen’s life.

...I will save my mother... As someone who shares blood with the Revered Founder, I refuse to hand over the royal family to that monster!

Ba-dump. Ba-dump . Her heart was about to leap out of her chest.

She was nervous and agitated. It felt like her heart had been punctured by needles. Her attendant had told her it was psychological pain from stress.

“Please take care of yourself,” he had told her.

“No, Shuvalts. I just have to bear it for a little longer...”

There was only one way to win: by reaching the palace and using her abilities to expose the traitor.

Yet, there were *three* ways she could be defeated: by getting captured by the underlings of Elletear, Aliceliese, or the Zoa.

She would be hauled off, and either held captive or quieted by the traitor. It would be over. This was why she needed guards.

If she were to say what was really on her mind... If she were to scream from the depths of her heart...

What she really needed was a powerful subordinate working under her forever instead of temporary guards...then, she would never have to worry again.

“Right, Iska?”

"Just so you know, I haven't given up on making you my subordinate."

"....." She placed her hand on the left side of her chest.

Though she still had a long way to go, the humble mound had a feminine softness to it.

She recalled the events of the day when she had clung onto his hand, pressed her chest against him in an inexperienced way, and tried her hand at seduction. She had done it because he was an adolescent boy.

As a princess, that was something she should have been embarrassed about. Had the queen witnessed this, Sisbell would have been reprimanded.

...But mother...we have to agree to disagree, since you think your status as queen comes before anything else.

Pride came second. For the sake of protecting her country, she wouldn't snub weaponizing her sex appeal. She wouldn't pay any heed to disgrace or the need for dignity. There were more despicable things happening in the world, like surprise attacks on the battlefield.

"I'm fine... I'm fine if everyone thinks I'm a dirty witch..."

Who cared if she was looked down upon? Who cared if everyone thought of her as some cheap witch?

...But mother...I feel at ease when I can hold someone...

She liked being around Iska.

"He's all I have right now."

She had held his arm and felt his warmth. And relief had pooled at the bottom of her heart.

Though her initial motive had been to seduce him, she had forgotten her goal while engrossed in the pleasure of embracing him. If only they could stay that way forever. She would never have to worry about anything else.

Iska and the rest of Unit 907 would guard her for thirty days.

"...Twenty-four days left? Twenty-five?"

She had more than enough time.

She didn't need to rush. She would head to the central state and then charge into the palace.

"Guide me, astral energies."

She prayed to the planet.

If that would lend her words power, then she would offer as many prayers as she needed to make her wish come true.

CHAPTER 3



Sister War

1

Nebulis Sovereignty. Liesbaden.

The clean streets were painted by the morning sunlight. The narrow, cobbled paths were bustling with children on their way to school. The roadways were crowded with commuters in cars.

...I realized yesterday...their roads are cobbled, not made of asphalt like the Imperial capital.

There was something about Liesbaden that felt like the neutral cities—vestiges of a land that had once been an independent state.

“Iska, could you close the curtains?”

“Oh, right.”

He drew them over the view of the city from the living room in Room 901.

Behind him, Sisbell was lounging on the sofa.

Commander Mismis and Nene were next to her, sitting on the carpet.

“What an early departure.” Jhin sat in a chair next to the table, staring at the princess. “Shualts, right? He’s not in the hotel anymore. Is that right?”

“He’s heading to the central state ahead of us,” Sisbell quietly confirmed.

Her hair had been let out of her usual pigtails, flowing straight down her back. It made her seem more mature. Iska had done a double take when he first saw her.

“His astral powers are suited for working undercover. He will arrive at the central state tomorrow. I imagine he will be able to receive an audience with the queen the day after. We will wait for his message.”

“And what happens after he meets with the queen?” Jhin’s hand went to his sniper bullets.

When will I need to use these? his silence seemed to imply.

“I can think of two possibilities. The queen may dispatch her own confidants. If that doesn’t happen, I think she would use her connections to secure our safety.”

“What would trigger the second possibility? That seems like a last resort.”

“Some people raise objections to every single one of the queen’s actions. As I’ve told you, the royal family is not a monolith.”

“That Mask guy?”

“When it comes to him, everyone is in agreement, even her haters.”

“—So. We’re on standby until then? Looks like we’re just killing time for four or five days.” Jhin propped his chin up in his hand on the table.

On top of the desk was the state map. A circle in red ink indicated the hotel.

“Every two days, we’re going to change our hotel. Hiding out in the same place is dangerous. If we stay long term, the hotels will get suspicious of us, too.”

“I will leave the decision-making to you. It’s what you specialize in, after all.”

Sisbell was wearing glasses with nonprescription lenses. In Iska’s eyes, today’s hairstyle and glasses were sufficient to make her look like a different person.

“Just as we planned, Iska and I will head over to be on lookout. We’ll be at the terminal. If there are assassins dispatched from the central state, I believe they will use this railway,” Sisbell said.

Their strategy was to take more of the offense and find the assassins before the assassins found them.

With Sisbell’s Illumination, they could track them as much as they needed to after they were discovered once.

The only problem was that Lord Mask’s team knew Unit 907.

“Here, Iska. Put these on and break a leg out there.” Mismis handed him a

paper bag.

It held a pair of glasses for a disguise.

“You want me to wear these, too?”

“Of course. Try them on... Wow! They look great! What do you think, Nene?”

“You look cool! You almost look smart!”

“...Not exactly a compliment.” Iska sighed in front of the mirror.

2

Liesbaden. The terminal station, South Altoria.

This station was practically on the southern tip of the vast state, connecting to the central state by continental railway. It not only functioned as a terminal station but also incorporated a shopping center, hotels, and a composite of other establishments.

“We have arrived at South Altoria. Please remember to take your belongings with you.”

“Let’s go, Rin.”

“Coming. Just wait a moment, Lady Alice. This is heavy.”

Alice hopped out of the rail car. Rin pulled along bundled-up carts, trying to catch up.

“We need to find her.”

“You’re in too much of a hurry. It’s already evening, and we need to find a vacant hotel. Especially since that will become our base of operations.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize we hadn’t settled on a hotel yet.”

“...Before I could make a reservation, you had already leaped onto a train, Lady Alice. We were supposed to take the one after that and arrive in the middle of the night.”

Rin was tuckered out. She had on the most unusual attire of sweat clothes instead of her usual apron and uniform. Though Alice was in the dress that she

saved for the neutral cities, she had her hair tied up behind her.

“Lady Alice.”

Coming out from a different car, two apparent businesspeople—one man and one woman—passed by them, whispering covertly in her ear.

“We have arrived. We will disperse in the terminal station and commence the search. The second party is scheduled to arrive on the next train.”

“All right. I will ask you to convene at nine o’clock at night.”

“Understood.”

They left as though nothing had happened. The queen’s agents traveling with Alice wore suits that were completely wrinkle free. She watched as they blended in with the other travelers.

“...What if she’s already gone to a different state?”

“She was spotted at the checkpoint yesterday. If she felt like it, Lady Sisbell would be long gone.”

However, they had come to search for her here, as instructed by the queen.

“My mother thinks she’s here, right?”

“Yes. She said if your sister is thinking things through, she would bide her time here and send her attendant as a messenger to the palace.”

To Sisbell, the palace was a den of adversaries.

Rather than approaching the castle, it was safer to have her attendant head there as a scout. Alice could see where she was coming from.

“Of course, even if she is here, finding her will be difficult. There are several hundred thousand people in this state alone.”

Rin pulled the carts along behind her as they headed to the exit. They looked around the storefronts of the station that were lined up in a row when Rin asked, “She is your sister, Lady Alice. Do you have any leads?”

“If I did, this job would be easy.” Alice shrugged. “She was always shut away in her own room. I don’t know anything about her. I don’t even know if she likes cake or pudding.”

“Please make use of your innate luck. Activate your ability that allowed you to meet a certain swordsman at the neutral cities.”

“My encounters with Iska were purely coincidental.”

If she had the power to do that, she would have already used it forever ago to find her sister.

She would have used it for Iska.

...I want to run into him on the battlefield...not neutral cities or anywhere else.

She wasn't lucky—she was losing.

The fate of the planet seemed to toy with Alice's predictions.

“But right. It might be fun to think of what kind of places Sisbell might hit up. With an area this big, I'll need to use my brains to conduct this search.”

Alice looked between the businesses filled with travelers, pointing at the sign of a fresh-squeezed juice shop.

“That one!”

“Uh. Are you being serious, Lady Alice...?” Rin looked at her dubiously. “It's a juice bar, just like in any other terminal station. All they offer is juice squeezed from fruit. There is no reason for Lady Sisbell to go to there.”

“Obviously to quench her thirst.” She beckoned Rin over with her hand and started to walk toward the juice bar. “This building is hot and stuffy from people passing through the terminal. The air is dry from the AC. I think she would feel like drinking a cup of refreshing fruit juice. Let's go inspect the place. I think we ought to have some for ourselves.”

“...Are you *sure* you don't just want to drink the juice, Lady Alice?”

“I'm just trying to think like Sisbell.”

Obviously, there was no Sisbell in line.

“Aw, shucks. I was wrong.”

“I knew it. Which one do you want to drink, Lady Alice?”

“Hm...”

There was an apple-flavored green juice packed with nutrients and a banana smoothie made with soy milk and *kinako* , sweet soybean flour. There was even a strawberry shake made with farm-fresh berries.

They all seemed delicious, but Alice wanted to have a juice of the people, which she rarely had an opportunity to drink. That meant a deluxe melon soda topped with a whopping amount of fresh cream.

“I’ve decided. Rin, I’d like a—”

“Excuse me. Could I get a melon soda and one strawberry shake?”

“...Hm?”

Rin hadn’t been the one who ordered. Nor Alice.

A boy with dark brown hair had casually joined the line in front of Alice and Rin as they were still deciding. He had a gentle face and wore black-rimmed glasses.

He looked like Iska. And he sounded a lot like Iska...

Alice caught herself staring at him, as he turned around with the drinks in hand.

“.....Ah.”

“.....Oh.”

Their eyes met—the boy from the Empire in his new getup and the middle princess in her disguise.

“Wait. Is that you, Iska?! What’s with those glasses?!”

“Alice?! Why are *you* here?”

She was supposed to be looking for her sister. Instead, she had wound up finding an Imperial subject!

Rin pointed at him. “You! Why are you in our country...? You were supposed to be in the desert. Have you no shame?!”

“.....”

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue? Yeah, we see through your cheap

disguise!”

“Who might you be?”

“...I-it’s me! ...Come on! You have to recognize me, right?!” Rin raised up her brown hair with her hands to simulate pigtails.

It wasn’t just her hairstyle that was throwing him off—she wasn’t in her housekeeper’s uniform. Iska must have thought she was a different person entirely.

“So what’s the meaning of this?” Alice appraised Iska, looking him over from head to toe, focusing particularly on his glasses.

She didn’t peg him for having poor vision, and he hadn’t been wearing them at the neutral city. What else could they be, if not part of a disguise?

...He doesn’t look bad in them... With his gentle face, they make him look like an intellectual and... Wait! What am I thinking?! Alice snapped back to her senses.

The issue wasn’t his disguise. It was that he had to know he was trespassing.

“Are you on an Imperial mission? In that case, I cannot overlook this.”

“I-I’m not! This is a misunderstanding, Alice!” Iska backed away, balancing drinks in both hands. “This isn’t a mission for the Empire. I mean, I’m not here voluntarily...”

“What’s the difference?”

“Um...like I said, um, so, uh,” Iska fumbled.

Of course, Alice had no intention of going easy in her interrogation. Someone from the Empire trespassing in the Sovereignty was a serious crime. She needed to know his motivations.

“I’ll hear you out once we get out of the terminal station. Iska, you’re coming with—”

“Lady Alice.”

Someone had called out behind her.

“You did not need to wait for us. What an honor.”

“We’re here.”

“Y-yes?!” Alice’s voice cracked when they called out her name.

—They were two agents of the queen.

The pair were young, wearing matching gray suits.

“Lady Alice? Who might this be?”

The agents looked at Iska. He had gone tight-lipped, picking up that they were different.

Terrible timing.

...Just as I was about to question Iska... It would have been bad if the agents were to see.

Iska was an Imperial soldier.

If they found out why Alice had been able to declare his origin, she would come under suspicion.

“Uh! I’m giving him directions! He got lost in the station, and I was telling him the closest exit!”

Some things required sacrifice. Gritting her teeth, Alice pushed Iska from behind. She was telling him to *shoo* .

“You know where to go now.”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.” Iska speed-walked away, even though he was confused.

“See?”

“Of course. Excuse us. We called your name at a bad time.”

The pair lowered their heads respectfully.

To all around them, Alice appeared to be the daughter of a company president, while they were employees. No one would guess they were the royal family’s agents.

“Proceed as planned. We will assemble at nine o’clock at night. Make sure one of you is available.”

“As you wish.”

The envoys of the royal family disappeared into the crowd. Alice exchanged a look with Rin, waiting for them to go out of sight.

“Rin.”

“Yes. The Imperial swordsman headed to the eighth exit. He is carrying two cups in his hands, so he shouldn’t be able to run.”

“Two. That’s important. He’s with someone else.”

They sprinted toward the exit.

It had to be another member of his Imperial unit. She guessed it was Commander Mismis, whom she had met at a neutral city, though that would make it difficult to greet her.

“You cowards!”

“What did you do to Iska?! You know the rules of this place and still dared to act so brazenly.”

Mismis regarded Alice as a coward who had attacked her subordinate. That misunderstanding had yet to be resolved, and Mismis still resented her for it.

...I need to get over it... Even if it’s her, I can’t let Imperial forces trespass.

She would find and restrain them. If they tried to run, she could chase them up to the border. Alice had no qualms using force if they resisted her.

“Lady Alice, over there!”

Under a sign indicating the eighth exit, Iska was looking around, seeming flustered.

“I can’t believe he’s bold enough to stand in such a conspicuous place. Toting his two drinks with the utmost care. Lady Alice, what should we do?”

“...He’s acting odd.”

Why wasn’t he running away? If Iska devoted his energy to escaping, Alice and Rin would struggle following him.

“There is a possibility he’s waiting for someone.”

“Yes. Then we should take the second person hostage. I do not know who it

could be, but I doubt they would be stronger than him.” Holding her breath, Alice hid in the shadow of a building.

She wouldn’t target Iska, but the other person.

In other words, she was going for the weaker one. She would take that person hostage and demand that Iska surrender. She visualized this strategy in her mind.

“Iska.” A girl came skipping over.

She had vibrant strawberry-blond hair and wore smart-looking glasses. Though she appeared to be younger than Alice, they were equal in terms of looks.

“Sorry for making you wait. Thank you for the drink.” She grinned at Iska.

Though her hair was down and she was wearing glasses, Alice immediately recognized her younger sister, Sisbell.

“What?!”

Iska had been waiting for *her sister* ? She couldn’t have invited an Imperial soldier into the country as princess!

...What is going on?! ...This matches Lord Mask’s story!

Alice had thought Lord Mask’s theory was unfounded conjecture. Was this, in fact, the truth?

“She concealed her whereabouts. Isn’t it rational to think she has the help of the Imperial forces?”

That couldn’t be right. Alice had no idea why Sisbell had brought an Imperial soldier with her.

...Her involvement with Iska should have been a one-time thing from a year ago... They had met again in Alsamira by chance, but she’d told me that nothing else had happened.

In reality, her sister had brought an Imperial soldier along with her. Alice couldn’t come up with an explanation for this, based on what she had been told by Sisbell. Were there still more secrets connected to her relationship with

Iska?

“This is...very interesting.” Rin had knitted her eyebrows together. “Looking at the facts, it appears as though Lady Sisbell is trying to betray the Sovereignty as Lord Mask has said. However, this seems too unbelievable.”

Iska’s face had been identified. If Alice had been able to recognize him, it wouldn’t be surprising if someone else from the Sovereignty could also identify him.

“Sisbell, let’s go. Hurry! Before we’re found!”

“Huh? Wh-what’s gotten into you, Iska? Why are you so worried?”

The two of them started to run. Iska had walked outside the station to avoid making Sisbell realize he was panicked.

“Do you think Iska will tell my sister that we found him?”

“He cannot,” Rin said, jogging after them. “Let’s say he tells her, ‘This is bad, Sisbell! Alice saw me!’ How would she respond?”

“What do you mean, Iska?”

“Are you so acquainted with my sister that she can instantly recognize you through your disguise?”

If he explained himself, Iska would be further questioned by Sisbell. So he wouldn’t tell her about running into Alice.

All Iska could do was run out of the station. If he did more than that, Sisbell would suspect him of something.

“This works in our favor, Lady Alice. That Imperial swordsman has to slow down to match Lady Sisbell’s pace. Let’s follow them from behind.”

“I have no objections.”

They continued to tail them. Iska and Sisbell walked along the crowded walkways. It wasn’t hard for Alice to follow them, but...

What was this strange emotion?

Illuminated orange from the evening sun, they looked like they were in love. It was like they were a couple walking side by side. She was bothered by that.

...Why do I feel irritated? ...I'm doing my job by following them! Meanwhile, Sisbell is...

There was a small change. Her sister took one of the drinks from Iska.

“Lady Sisbell took a drink!”

“...I have eyes.”

The two of them slowed to a walk along the path, sipping on their beverages.

Was Alice just imagining it, or were they acting too chummy?

They were close—*too* close. Their shoulders were almost touching now.

“They’re attached at the hip...! They’re way too close! I mean, he’s an Imperial soldier?!”

“Lady Alice, look!” Rin pointed ahead.

Upon finishing her drink first, Sisbell grabbed onto his arm, clinging with both her dainty hands wrapped around Iska’s elbow. Since he was still in the middle of his juice, he couldn’t shake her off.

“W-wait a second! She’s putting him in a tough spot...!”

Even from afar, she could tell he was troubled. Her sister just seemed to look up at his reaction in delight, showing no sign of letting go.

And most of all, her smile seemed to light up her entire face.

...I've never seen Sisbell like that... She's never looked so pleased in front of me or my mother!

Her cheeks appeared flushed, and her eyes were almost dewy. In the evening hour, they didn’t give off the vibe of a Sovereign princess and Imperial subject.

She seemed like a girl in love.

“.....”

There was a visceral reaction in her body. Something she’d never felt before.

She felt like she couldn’t breathe.

Her face was so hot, she was worried of burning herself. It felt like her blood was boiling, causing her to sweat profusely. She didn’t know why...but she

couldn't take her eyes off them.

"Lady Alice? Is something the matter?" Rin looked at her with wide eyes.

She must have thought it strange that her mistress had gone quiet. Alice did not have the capacity to answer her.

"—*Look, Iska. The sky is so beautiful.*" Her sister pointed out the setting sun, beaming at him.

Alice's heart almost leaped out of her chest when she saw her sister's smile.

"Lady Alice?"

"Hff... Hah...! Ugh!"

"Wh-what's wrong, Lady Alice?! You're panting like an enraged cat, and your face is bright red!"

"This is serious!"

Her mind was just about to go blank from frustration. She couldn't watch the situation with composure for another moment—she knew this was the most disgraceful experience of her entire life. He was about to be *stolen from her*.

"Iska is *my* rival. How dare Sisbell—!"

"Lady Alice, look!"

Past Rin's trembling fingertip, Sisbell stopped Iska at a corner of the main street. Smiling mischievously, the youngest princess went on her tiptoes, reaching her fingers out to him as Iska turned around.



They grazed his cheek...wiping off some cream that had snuck itself away from his mouth.

She didn't use a handkerchief or a paper napkin. She used her own fingertip.

Of course, Iska was surprised. His face was beet red. He was saying something quickly, but they couldn't hear the distant conversation.

...H-h-how could she...do that in public? ...I'm jealous...I mean, gross! Even Iska is shocked!

This wasn't something a princess could do.

It was absurd. Had their mother seen, her face would have been bright red with shame.

"Lady Alice!" Rin cried out again.

Alice snapped her head up. Iska was searching his surroundings—to check if they were being followed. Rin was pointing, not at him but at Sisbell behind him.

Iska had turned away, taking no notice of Sisbell behind him. She was looking at the cream on her fingertip.

While he wasn't looking...she brought her finger to her mouth.

No way.

That crossed the line. Even if Sisbell was her little sister, Alice couldn't turn a blind eye to that.

"No, Sisbell. That's—"

Nom. The youngest princess carried the whipped cream into her mouth... which had been on *his* mouth.

She had licked it. When he turned around, Sisbell pretended like nothing had happened. She was blushing from satisfaction, looking at him with upturned eyes.

She was smitten.

"..."

In that moment...something snapped in Alice. Audibly.

Her entire vision flooded red. Her blood chilled instantly. Even the trembling of her fingertips abruptly subsided.

Her heart quieted.

“————— This. Means. War.”

“Um, Lady Alice...?”

“—— I get it now.”

Sensing something was up, Rin went pale.

Alice beamed at her. “I realized something. My worst enemy wasn’t the Empire.”

“P-pardon...?”

“Wait here. This will be over quickly.” She left Rin in the shadow of the building, storming to the main road. “I’ll turn her into an ice sculpture and sell her off to a jeweler. For the crime of laying a hand on *my Iska*, I’ll carve—”

“No carving! Lady Alice, please come back to your senses!”

Rin used every ounce of strength in her to pin Alice’s arms behind her back. Though she was dainty, her tempered arms weren’t easy to shake off.

“L-let go, Rin! Y-you can’t grab me here! We’re in front of other people!”

“This is the only way I can stop you, Lady Alice!”

“B-but...!”

Iska was going to be taken from her!

With crisis around the corner, Alice’s brain reached its capacity. She suddenly couldn’t care less about anything else.

Who knew about an order from her mother, the queen, to protect her sister?

Or their confrontation with the House of Zoa?

Or the conclave?

All of it seemed trivial, compared to what was happening before her very

eyes.

...Because...because if Iska isn't here anymore....what will be my life's purpose?!

Battling the Empire was an astral mage's mission.

Born as a princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty, she was destined to claw her way through the conclave.

Unifying the world was her duty. She had to do it.

Born under the fate of the stars, those truths of her life were inevitable.

But Iska was different.

Alice had decided on him of her own volition. She had *chosen him* as her greatest foe.

"Peace negotiations. I want to stop the war."

"That's why I thought of catching a direct descendant from Nebulis's bloodline. I thought even the Nebulis royal family would waver if one of their relatives was in danger. That way, I could make them come to the negotiation table even if they didn't want to."

Those lofty aspirations were an impossibility. They would never come to be.

But...she had been charmed by his conviction and way of life.

He was her *foe*. He had barreled into her, certain of his ideals. He was the one she wanted to settle things with.

...I don't care who wins or loses the battle...as long as the battle is just between the two of us!

Out of all things that could have happened, someone was going to swipe him from under her nose.

"Hey, Rin."

"Y-yes?"

"I wonder if my mother would allow me to have a duel against my sister."

"Obviously not!"

“...Gah. This is mortifying. I can’t believe all I can do is watch.” She gritted her teeth and endured.

The beating of her heart still hadn’t settled, but it was paramount that she face reality.

“...It barely missed his lips. It was just his cheek. In that case, I suppose the duel is postponed.”

“What are you talking about?!” Rin looked up at her, clutching onto Alice. “I have a proposal. Would you allow me to handle them?”

“You? You mean that you’ll make contact with them?”

“Yes. With all due respect, Lady Sisbell still doesn’t trust you. If an attendant were to approach her alone, we may be able to map out a deal.”

“.....”

Rin’s eyes were looking straight at her.

Alice understood she wasn’t going to back down. Rin had already made up her mind.

“...All right. I will watch over our luggage. I trust you.”

“Thank you! Then I will see you soon!”

The attendant ran like the wind.

Alice took in another deep breath.

Alice was enraged—and anxious.

“Agh, Lady Alice! What has gotten into you?!” Rin said to herself as she raced down the alleys, chasing after those two.

...This is the first time I’ve ever seen Alice this flustered... She must have been so enraged, she didn’t even know how to cope.

There was something unusual about Alice’s attachment to the Imperial swordsman Iska. Though he was an enemy, she had developed a connection with him.

Rin had served Alice since childhood. He was the first person that Alice had

taken any kind of interest in. If someone were stealing him from her, she wouldn't overlook it, not even if that person was her sister.

If this continued, Alice would explode.

She's become stubborn. She should have just protected Lady Sisbell! That would have prevented this...!

First she would pry apart the princess and the Imperial swordsman. That was the easy part.

The complications started after that. Even if she were able to reunite the two siblings, there was a chance a sisterly feud would break out—seeing that Alice was seething.

“I need to pacify Lady Alice. Otherwise, her inner circle will be tortured—meaning me. Do you understand that, Imperial swordsman?!”

Her method of pacifying Alice was...harm reduction.

Option one. Could she offer Alice a sweet treat?

—No. Alice would remember the earlier melon-soda incident and explode in her face.

Option two. Would it help to take her to admire the arts?

—No. There wasn't an art museum nearby. Plus, she might grow indignant and claim to turn her sister into an ice sculpture again.

Option three. Let her get a good night's sleep.

—No. That would only mean dreaming about this scene and fuming.

“None of those will work! Ugh! This is the only option! You take responsibility for this, Iska!”

She ground together her back teeth in frustration and then leaped out from a back alley into the main street.

She launched herself in front of them.

“Ahh?!”

“—Rin!”

“Lower your voice. And Imperial swordsman, zip it.”

Sisbell blinked at her in surprise. Rin bowed to the youngest princess, careful not to overdo it, which would draw the attention of normal people on the streets.

“We were searching for you, Lady Sisbell.”

“...That’s a new look for you, Rin. I can’t believe you would wear a sweatshirt.” The strawberry-blond girl scowled. Her shy smile had slipped off her face.

“Lady Sisbell, what are you doing here?”

“What does it look like? Educating myself. I’m wandering through the states to develop my views. Same as Alice’s trips to neutral cities.”

“Let me ask you directly.”

Rin looked Sisbell straight in the eyes through her glasses.

“Lord Mask is looking for you under certain suspicions. Do you have any idea what those could be?”

“Gh!” Sisbell trembled.

Rin noticed Iska’s eyes immediately narrow. Instead of expressing surprise, he had upped his defenses.

—In other words, he already knows.

Iska already realized Sisbell was targeted as though it were a matter of fact. So why was he traveling with the witch princess?

...Imperial soldiers as guards? ...Lady Sisbell, did you sell your soul to the Empire?

Rin was starting to doubt her. As someone who served the Lou, the attendant could not overlook it.

“Neither Lady Alice nor I have any ill will against you, Lady Sisbell. We came here under orders from the queen to protect you.”

“...No.”

“No to what?”

“I haven’t asked for protection. I will only return to the palace at my own pace. Please relay the message to Alice.”

She wouldn’t accept charity from her older sister. The trench between the sisters ran deep.

“Allow me to ask one question. I cannot go back until I hear a direct reply.”

“You want to know why I’m here?” Iska was the one who replied.

Was he trying to protect Sisbell? Rin thought it seemed that way.

“It has to do with my commander,” he declared.

“Iska...?!”

“I’d rather clear up any misunderstandings. If we keep silent, they’ll just suspect us both.”

“...If you insist.” Sisbell looked down as though she wasn’t so sure. It didn’t take long until she choked her words out. “...All right. I will tell you myself.”

“May I call over Lady Alice?”

“No. Please just relay the message. I would like only to tell you.”

“Understood. I will record the conversation and have Lady Alice listen to it.” Rin pulled a small recording device out of her back pocket, turning it on and bowing again to the young princess.

“If you please, Lady Sisbell.”

3

Room 901 in the Felix Hotel.

The setting sun dyed the shopping streets red, sinking in the ravines between buildings.

“We’re back.”

The door was nudged open. On standby, the three unit members were there, awaiting Iska’s return.

“Welcome back... Huh? What happened to her?!”

Mismis was looking behind him. Three pairs of eyes focused on Sisbell on his back.

“She got a little tired.” Iska was carrying the youngest princess.

Though she was already tiny and delicate, Sisbell was slumped over without an ounce of strength to hold onto Iska’s back.

“We were patrolling to make sure no one was following us. The new experience tuckered her out.”

“...What he said.” The witch princess stretched out onto the sofa.

—They hadn’t lied. Technically.

There was one thing omitted. In the middle of their patrol, they had run into exactly what Sisbell feared—a search party, and one sent by the queen.

...We knew it was possible... We went outside to get a lead on them, but they got us instead.

Sisbell wasn’t tired from all the walking, but from her inexperience with negotiating. Rin had forced it on her during their conversation.

“—Zzz .”

“Huh? Hey, Jhin, she’s already asleep. She must’ve been super-tired.” Nene had on a slightly strained smile as she pointed at the witch who had started to snore quietly in her sleep.

“What should we do?” Nene asked. “We were saying we’d eat when you came back, Iska. Do you think she’ll be mad if we shared a meal without her?”

“Probably. Based on her personality, I can imagine her making a scene if she were left out. If we want to be safe, we should just wait.”

“Ugh. But the commander and I are hungry...!” Nene pouted, pulling a drink out of the fridge. “Oh well, guess I’ll have a drink and just wait for her to get up. Commander, you want some? The fridge is stocked with anything you can think of.”

“Yes, please! A ginger ale for me!”

“Commander, that’s your third one of the day. Jhin, you want anything?”

“Water.” Jhin was operating as usual.

At the moment, he was sitting next to the table, in the middle of reading. From a distance, it appeared he was absorbed in some sort of document published in the Sovereignty.

Iska watched him. “Jhin, could I ask you to hold down the fort one more time?”

“...You planning on going out?”

“Just to the hallway. I want to scope out the hotel just in case. Besides, we can’t do anything until she wakes up.”

“Keep it under an hour.”

Iska nodded, slipping out of the room again and heading to the hallway.

Guests passed him, heading out to dinner, and none seemed to pay him any mind. They didn’t even imagine someone from the Empire was walking out there in the open.

He went up one level to the tenth floor using the elevator. In the open hallway, the brown-haired girl greeted him.

“You came alone as promised. The rest of your unit stayed in the hotel room, correct?”

“If they hadn’t, you would have made a huge commotion about it.”

“Of course.” Rin crossed her arms. “Where is Lady Sisbell?”

“Tired out and asleep. Because of a certain someone’s interrogation.”

“That was part of my professional duties. If I were to go further, I would also say that was brought about by Lady Sisbell’s actions. To think she would request Imperial soldiers to guard her... If the people found out, it would be a scandal,” she whispered to herself and sighed. “I cannot believe a failed Saint Disciple has stepped foot in our country—not once, but twice.”

“Not of my own volition. Sisbell told you earlier.”

“.....”

“We would rather take our compensation and immediately leave the borders.”

An hour ago...there were three things that Sisbell had told Rin.

First, she had needed guards to return to the Sovereignty.

Second, she had found out the Imperial commander had become an astral mage.

Third, mages were kin. Because of that, Sisbell had proposed a trade.

“The Sovereignty and Empire treat the neutral cities as an armistice area, right?”

“I applied that logic to the independent states and temporarily agreed to a cease-fire and exchange.”

This had been her logic. Alice had been informed by Rin that Sisbell would be providing Commander Mismis with bandages to hide her astral crest as compensation.

...No problems there. Alice already knows about Mismis. And she’s chosen to be quiet.

Rin started walking through the hall. Foregoing the elevator, she headed to the emergency stairwell.

“If it wasn’t you, I wouldn’t have believed that Lady Sisbell had an Imperial soldier as a guard.”

“.....”

“There is something I advised to Lady Alice in my own way.” Rin went up the stairs.

Sisbell’s room was on the ninth floor. They were currently on the tenth floor. She was heading up another two floors.

“Lady Sisbell’s reasoning is forced. Even in the direst situations, it is social death to hire an Imperial unit. No one in the family would trust her. It would be terrible if the Zoa were to catch wind of it.”

“The Zoa?”

“.....I’ve said too much. They are the blood relatives of Lord Mask.” The brown-haired girl turned around.

Two steps ahead, Alice’s attendant sighed, which was a rarity coming from her.

“So we should feign ignorance. This was my suggestion to Lady Alice.”

“She’s going to pretend she didn’t see us?”

“We will not concern ourselves with this . We won’t pay any mind to Lady Sisbell’s hires or location. Things will be settled once she reaches the palace on her own. If she fails—if your trade with Lady Sisbell comes to light—she will be the only one taking the fall.”

Alice wouldn’t report to the queen about this incident.

By foregoing this report, the youngest princess would be the only one to suffer from the weight of her crime if she were caught. It would be like a lizard abandoning its own tail in face of greater danger.

...I did that a year ago...when I didn’t tell Unit 907 about helping the witch escape from prison.

Iska had wanted to act on his own.

Had he spoken a word of his plan, Commander Mismis, Nene, and Jhin would have been charged for his crime.

“Lady Alice has said she would like to hear your story directly from you.”

“I’m prepared for that.”

He had no right to refuse. At the snap of Alice’s fingers, the Imperial soldiers would be immediately subdued by the astral corps.

“This is it.”

She exited the stairwell, heading back into a hallway and stopping in front of a room.

“You go in alone.”

“Huh? But what about you, Rin?”

“Me? Another unit is waiting in the lobby. While Lady Alice is with you, I will buy some time... Hey! Stop trying to get information out of me!”

“Ow?! W-wait! It’s unfair to use a knife!”

She had tried to stab him. Rin had prodded at him with a blade hidden in her sleeve.

“You little—! You intend to use your silver tongue to uncover Lady Alice’s plans. I misjudged you! I didn’t think you would use an underhanded trick!”

“You’re the one who’s revealing everything?!”

“Silence! ...Agh. You always trip me up.” The attendant pointed at the door of the room with the tip of her knife. “Hurry up and get into Lady Alice’s room. Be subjected to questioning or torture or whatever!”

“Huh? Torture? You say it so casually.”

“I’ll tell you one thing.” Rin prodded his back with the knife. “For reasons I cannot fathom, Lady Alice’s emotions are all over the place. To put it simply, she’s fuming.”

“What? But why...?”

“No idea. But who cares about that? I’m more interested in finding the appropriate sacrifice for her to lash out on. I’d rather not be the target of her anger.”

“Neither would I!”

“Go in already. Go forth and become the one that quells her rage!”

“Wait?!”

The door opened. He was kicked in the back, stumbling into Alice’s room.

The living room was an expansive reception area illuminated by glittering lights. A lone girl was sitting wordlessly on a luxurious sofa, looking at him.

“.....”

Something was off.

Alice’s bearing was different from usual.

She was on the sofa cradling both of her knees as though she were a child. This would normally be the part where she politely thanked him for coming, but all she did was stare at him in silence.

There was something intense about the light in her eyes. This terrible mood of hers had already reared its ugly head, as Rin had said.

...She can't be thinking of attacking me, right? I had to leave behind my astral swords, which means my only defense would be to try to make a break for it.

But he had to keep a level head.

He had been summoned by Alice. Since she said she wanted to hear about things regarding her sister, he liked to think the chances of a surprise attack were low.

"Uh. Hello?"

"....."

"Rin led me here. She said you wanted me to give my word about Sisbell's statement."

"No thanks."

"Huh?" He doubted his ears.

The witch princess had replied in a slovenly tone that he had never heard from her before.

".....Nuh-uh. That's not why I called you here."

She sounded like a sulking child. But Iska didn't even get the opportunity to point that out.

"How do you explain yourself?!" she shrieked, her voice echoing throughout the room.

It was bloodcurdling.

She seemed like she would burst into tears at any second. Her voice trembled as though she were desperately trying to keep it from cracking.

"...How do you...explain yourself...?!"

The golden-haired girl rose to her feet.

Her ruby-colored eyes quivered like the surface of water. The Sovereign princess had her hands balled in fists. But Iska still could not understand the intensity of her anger.

He knew she was upset, but where did that emotion stem from? It was so baffling that even Rin was in the dark.

“Explain what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It was silent again.

“During the daytime.” Alice was timid. “You were walking with her.”

“...You mean Sisbell?”

Alice bobbed her head up and down. “I was watching.”

“Didn’t Rin tell you it was part of our duties? We headed to the terminal to scout together because we thought that Lord Mask’s group would come through that station.”

And they hadn’t been wrong.

Even Alice had used the station. They only failed in their scouting duties because of Sisbell’s reckless request.

...If she didn’t tell me she was thirsty...Alice wouldn’t have found us.

He didn’t understand why Alice was upset.

“Rin told me that Sisbell’s hiring of us isn’t forgivable for either country. And I have to agree. Are you mad about that?”

“No.” The witch princess shook her head.

She was now standing upright. She kept trying to say something but then clamping her lips shut.

“Alice. I know this sucks, but I won’t know what’s wrong until you tell me.”

“.....”

How long did the silence between them last?

He sensed Alice swallowing her breath.

At last, she spoke. “.....*You were walking with her .*”

“Pardon?”

“You were holding my sister’s hand. You snubbed me.”

“I mean, I was supposed to be guarding her.”

If he were showing signs of taking security precautions, they would have looked suspicious. They needed to try to act very casual and blend in—and most important of all, he’d done that to protect Alice’s own sister.

Was there something about what he did that an older sister would find upsetting?

“...Like I said! You need to be more sensitive to these things! You’re always...”

“...?”

“Fine, I’ll tell you!” She swept aside the bangs covering her eyes.

The Ice Calamity Witch Aliceliese turned to Iska, pointing her finger at him.

“It’s unfair that you’re doing everything with Sisbell!”

Her declaration echoed.

“.....Excuse me?” Iska cocked his head to the side.

Alice took one step, then another, toward him, still pointing.

“It’s a betrayal!”

“A betrayal of what?!”

“You promised to be *my* rival, but you’re acting as her yes-man!”

“I am not... We’re putting our lives on the line. I don’t think what we’re doing is immoral.”

It was all a deal to hide Mismis’s astral crest.

In fifty days, Unit 907 would have to return to the Imperial capital. If not for this arrangement with Sisbell, when that happened, they would all be caught without any way to conceal it.

“I refuse to accept it!”

“Let me ask you this instead... If we were to stop guarding Sisbell immediately, would you give us the same reward in exchange?”

“Th-that’s impossible. I can’t aid my enemies!”

“Then what other choice do we have?”

“Ughhhhhh!”

“Um, a childish protest will get you nowhere.”

“...Hmph.” Her shoulders slumped. “You’re probably the only one in the world who could be so incomppliant.”

“It’d be weird if I *was* compliant. We’re supposed to be enemies.”

“Yes. That’s why I won’t insist...it’s fine. I feel like seeing your face has cleared my mood.”

The golden-haired princess took a long, deep breath. Malice evaporated, and her gaze became gentle.

“Let me just say one more thing. I’m not mad at you.”

“Really?”

Then who—? He decided not to pose the question. Alice might end up getting upset again.

“Then you’re not mad at Sisbell either.”

“No! I am furious at her!”

“With Sisbell?! Then what are you going to do about it?”

“Good question. I’m going to decide that right now.” Alice nodded in satisfaction before looking around the living area where they were alone. “I called you here to act as a witness. As the second princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty, I have the right to pass judgment on a lower-ranked princess.”

“...Do you really?”

“Once we return to the palace, I will pass that law and create a legislative committee.”

“Aren’t you going out of your way to punish her?!”

“Just cooperate. If we don’t get this done soon, Rin will come back.” Alice went to stand in the middle of the room and beckoned him over.

It was pitch-black beyond the glass wall. Night had come. Looking down from the upper floor, they could see the streets of the Sovereignty brightly illuminated.

“Ahem. Well then, Iska.”

“...What do you plan on doing?”

“Checking to see what you did with Sisbell this afternoon. As your *one and only* rival, I have the right to know.”

After she had emphasized that she was his only match, Alice drew closer, stepping up to him, even though she could have been anywhere else in this giant living room. She didn’t say anything as she held Iska’s hand.

“...Y-you were holding hands—like this.” She squeezed.

He could feel Alice’s warmth radiate from the palm closing over his almost passionately.

“Uh, um...Alice?”

“D-don’t move!”

He tried to shake his hand free on reflex, but Alice’s grip wouldn’t let him. Iska peeked at her face. Alice seemed to be only be concerned with his hand—as if observing how it felt.

“I-I see. So this is what my sister was doing.”

“...I think you could tell from looking.”

“That’s not true. I can’t know unless I try it out myself. Um, so...your palms are rough. I wonder if it’s because you carry a sword.”

“You’re so shifty!”

“I’m launching a real investigation here!” Alice objected, face flushed red.

She finally let go of his hand. She continued down, grabbing his elbow this time, enveloping it between her two arms...like Sisbell had done earlier that day.

Like lovers locking arms.

“And then you did this... Th-this is so shameless. The princess of a country, walking around linking her arms with an enemy soldier!”

“...Says the one doing the same thing, Alice.”

“Th-this is for research! This might pose as a real threat to the Sovereignty. That’s why I must do my due diligence investigating this.”

“Your due diligence?” He had added fuel to the fire. Iska realized that exactly one second later.

“She was even closer to you than this!” Alice clung onto him, crossing her arms over his.

That wasn’t all. She entwined both her arms around his right bicep, placing her weight on him. Alice’s chest pushed against Iska’s arm.

“I-it was like this...!”

It wasn’t a light touch.

Alice’s twin peaks encroached upon his space. Though they were soft, they also had a heaviness to them. They felt like nothing Iska had ever experienced before.

...And is that perfume? It smells nice.

...No, no, no. This is not good on all fronts!

Her sister had already done enough damage, but Alice was on another level. As she pressed against him, his arm sank snugly between her cleavage, as if her breasts were trying to consume him entirely.

“A-Alice...um, uhh...what are you doing...?”

“I-I’m copying my sister’s behavior! No more questions!”

Of course, Alice knew what she was doing.

Despite being feared as the Ice Calamity Witch, Alice was blushing all the way up to the tips of her ears. There was no mistaking that she was shaken up by bashfulness and hesitation.

However, Alice did not attempt to stop.

“Th-this is sick. It’s sinful...! It’s unfair...I mean, brash...”

“Then let go of my arm, Alice.”

“No!” A blunt rejection.

Like a kitten clinging to its mother, she latched onto Iska’s arm desperately, refusing to let up.

He noticed her breathing. Maybe because she was so close? It seemed strangely sweet and rougher at times. Was his imagination just playing tricks on him?

“...Ah...haah.....ngh...”

“What are you doing?!”

“Y-you’ve got the wrong idea. It’s nerves! From standing so close to a powerful enemy. Of course my breathing would become more labored!”

“Then let go of my arm.”

“No! Th-there’s still more I need to investigate!”

She shot him down again. She pushed her chest more forcefully against him so that Iska’s arm was practically buried in her cleavage. Suddenly, Iska heard a quiet whisper brush against his ear.

“.....I don’t want to let go.”

“What?”

“N-nothing! Y-you’ve got it wrong. I...was trying to step into my sister’s mind!”
Alice raised her face in a fluster.

Her large eyes were wet and teary. She was an enemy. Iska knew that, but he swallowed his breath in the face of her overwhelming beauty.

“.....”

“.....”

He was rendered speechless.

Their arms entwined. He could feel her body heat as she leaned on him. He

couldn't take his eyes off hers. Even he didn't know why.



On the other hand, Alice's feverish eyes seemed to take on a hint of uncertainty.

"Um, so Iska. This is very important. Even though we're rivals, I'd like us to grow close—"

"Are you safe, Lady Alice?!"

"Eek?!"

When the door was thrown open, Alice jumped up. Rin had come rushing in.

"Wh-what are you doing, Rin?! I-I was right in the middle of something momentous!"

"And what was that?"

"Um..."

Wrong word. Alice finally came back to her senses and looked around herself.

"I-it's nothing. Weren't you supposed to be downstairs...?"

"I thought it would be too perilous to leave you alone with an Imperial swordsman and came running at top speed...Lady Alice?" The attendant inspected Alice's face. "For some reason, you look like you're glowing. You were so deathly pale just earlier."

"Y-yeah...?"

Her skin was clear, like a pearl glistening with water droplets.

Rin was old enough to know what was going on. She immediately perceived the change in Alice. In the short period of time since she had left Alice, her skin seemed to glow as though life had been restored to it.

"Lady Alice, did something happen?"

"...Nothing! Nothing at all!" Alice averted her gaze.

Rin stared her down. "Your face seems red."

"I-it's just your imagination!"

"...Hm, Lady Alice, if you'll pardon me." She planted her hand on Alice's forehead.

After keeping it there for a few seconds, Rin's eyes opened wide.

"Oh no. You're burning up, Lady Alice! You must have caught a cold from our extended trips. You must rest right this minute."

"That's not true! I-I don't have a fever. Rin, I'm feeling better because—"

"Imperial swordsman!" Rin's anger was directed at Iska. "Your crime for overlooking her fever is a grave one!"

"You're misinterpreting the situation!" Iska exclaimed.

"Silence! The queen's agents will be gathering now. You have two seconds to make yourself scarce!"

"*You're* the ones who called me here!"

Rin had once again pulled a knife on him. Iska scrambled out of the room at full throttle.

...I can still feel Alice's warmth on my right arm... Wait! What am I thinking? That was just a stray thought—I've got to forget about it...!

He could still feel the sensation of her chest.

Weighty, but soft. It hadn't been unpleasant, even if he had virtually no say in the matter. In fact, it felt almost as though it had brought him some peace and —

...That sensual panting.

"Ugh! It wasn't like that!"

Trying to shake off his thoughts, Iska sprinted down the emergency stairs.

INTERMISSION



A Plot for the Queen's Assassination-Turned-Capture

1

The queen's room.

Even when day had turned to dusk the reception hall was flooded with light as though it were morning. During the day, it was filled with sunlight. During the night, it was illuminated with light absorbed by the moon crystal. Every surface rivaled the morning sun—the ceiling, walls, and pillars.

"Please excuse my lateness, mother."

"You're right on time. No need to apologize, Elletear."

The door opened. Queen Nebulis IIX exchanged looks with her oldest daughter, who carried herself into the room with grace.

"We have fifteen minutes until the conference. It will be held in the office on this floor. We will go there five minutes beforehand."

"Yes, mother." One of the most beautiful girls in the universe reverently bowed her head, smiling.

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

Her hair was an incredible emerald color tinged with gold.

Her mature bust was even more bountiful than Alice's, and faintly tinted pink. They possessed an allure that made men audibly gulp. Women, too.

Her lovely smile reached her eyes. Her face could steal the hearts of all who gazed upon it.

She was a beautiful siren.

At the age of twenty, her beauty was approaching devilish levels.

"How unusual," Elletear piped up lyrically. "I had no idea you would resort to

abusing your authority. My heart is racing.”

“.....”

“You kept the House of Zoa in the palace by calling for an emergency family meeting. The plan is to send Alice to Liesbaden while their hands are tied.”

The queen did not respond.

Elletear seemed more delighted. “Conference between the three blood clans is an annual, time-honored tradition. Its purpose is to pray for the prosperity of the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra. To openly abuse this sacred space is audacious. Only the queen could pull that off.”

“.....”

“Ha-ha, I wonder if Alice has reached Liesbaden by now. I hope she finds Sisbell.”

“Elletear—” the queen chided. “You are speaking in front of subordinates. Do not say things that could be taken out of context.”

“Oh, my apologies, *your majesty* .”

Elletear and the queen were not the only ones occupying the room.

Because they were having a formal meeting, policy secretaries and other assistants had assembled there. Four were chosen from their subordinates, waiting for the gathering.

Though the Zoa and Hydra were not there, it would be bad if any subordinates overheard the conversation.

“Dear me. It seems I was too excited.” Elletear tried to laugh it off, putting her hand to her mouth. “I thought this would be a great way to pass the time.”

The clock tower was along the wall. The needle was indicating it was five minutes before the conference.

“Let’s go. We cannot be late.”

The queen spun around. She had turned the hem of her dress, sweeping it over the floor as she headed to the exit.

In front of the queen, Elletear, and their four subordinates—a total of six

people...

Thunk The door swelled and ballooned like a bubble.

“Good-bye, House of Lou.”

The heavy metal door blistered red—and exploded.

“Ah!”

The queen’s room was engulfed in flames. The curtains disintegrated into ash. The shockwave peeled up the floorboards. The columns were blown away without a trace.

What had happened?

An explosion? A fire? As her vision blackened, the queen had flashbacks of countless blitz bombings from the Imperial forces on the battlefield.

Remembering her history of surviving military attacks kept Queen Mirabella conscious.

“Do not underestimate me !”

The queen hadn’t been the one to raise her voice.

This was the voice of one of the Founder’s descendants, a veteran who had conquered too many battlefields to count. It was the cry of Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX.

At the nape of her neck, the astral crest shined its brightest.

“Five Hundred Gods of Wind —Force all to back off!”

Wind swept up.

The flames roared, blisteringly hot. Thick black smoke billowed. The raging wind summoned by the shockwave threatened to blast the hall to smithereens.

“Ow...!”

Queen Mirabella let the corners of her mouth curl, standing among the embers.

Her thrust palm was bright red.

Blood poured out of her fingertips, burned by the explosion. Had she reacted

even a tenth of a second slower, her whole body would have been in that state.

“...Astral power, you guarded me well.”

She had barely succeeded.

Her shield had made it with just a moment to spare. The subordinates behind her had been protected.

“How are all of you holding up?”

“We... We’re unscathed! You saved us, your majesty... We must stop the bleeding of *your* fingers!”

“I am fine. They appear red, but the wounds are only skin-deep.”

The four subordinates peeled themselves off the ground. Behind them, Elletear slowly got up.

“.....”

“Elletear?”

“That was very close. I was saved by your powers, your majesty.”

Elletear was in one piece. Her royal dress was sooty from the flames. There was a tiny laceration on her mouth.

“Your majesty! Princess Elletear! What in the world happened?!”

Beyond what remained of the door, the elite armed guards came rushing in. With the atrocious state of the hall in front of them, all were speechless.

The chandelier had crashed onto the ground. The carpets had burned away to nothing. The tiles decorating the floor had been ripped away. An explosion of that scale could not have occurred spontaneously.

“This must have been some attack. Was it a bomb? Were there any suspicious figures outside the door? Is there a possibility that Imperial soldiers have intruded?”

“N-no!”

“We were in front of the door the entire time. We didn’t see a single suspicious person...”

The two soldiers replied nervously.

Both were trustworthy people who had served the House of Lou for many years. What they said held credibility.

The culprit was *close by*.

As soon as the queen and Elletear had tried to leave, the door had exploded. She couldn't believe that this was a timed or remote attack.

"Your majesty, may I speak my mind?" Elletear asked loudly.

She was trying to get the attention of the subordinates and armed soldiers around them.

"I heard a familiar voice at the moment of explosion."

"....."

"What about you, your majesty?"

"What a coincidence, Elletear. I did as well."

"Good-bye, House of Lou."

That statement could be interpreted as a declaration of war. And its composed voice was indeed familiar.

"It sounded like the voice of Lord Mask from the House of Zoa."

Trembling in place, the subordinates and soldiers opened their eyes wide, gaping at Elletear before shifting their gaze to the queen.

"I-I'm afraid that...I heard the same, your majesty."

"I did as well!"

The policy secretaries and other assistants cautiously raised their hands.

Naturally, they would be timid. The three bloodlines had never had a direct dispute. At least, not officially.

Had the Zoa family broken the peace? Had they schemed to assassinate the queen?

"Listen closely. Put the conference on hold."

More soldiers gathered, paling as they saw the embers.

“Summon the House of Zoa immediately. Collect Lord Mask and Growley, their family head. Bring the other blood relatives and attendants.”

Clack, clack... The hard echo of footsteps came from the rubble-strewn hallway.

“Oh? What in the world—?”

There stood a tall man in black.

The agent at the center of the chaos himself. Lord Mask. He had casually walked into the room.

“Your majesty, what happened?”

He looked at the soldiers and vassals, observing the vestiges of the hollow doorframe. “I cannot believe this is the state of things right before the conference.”

“As you can see, there has been an attack. It was the deed of a ruthless individual who schemed to assassinate the queen.”

“...What?”

He sounded surprised. It didn’t seem like he was pretending, though he was the greatest actor of the age. This reaction almost seemed suspicious.

“And who is the culprit behind this?”

“*You*, ” uttered the queen.

The man in black stopped in his tracks for some time. “...Did I hear you correctly? I cannot grasp your meaning.”

“I will hear what you have to say during questioning. You two, guards, please escort him to a special room. Once everyone has been summoned, we will put you under house arrest until the suspicions have been cleared.”

“Urk.”

A pair of guards closed in on him from either side.

Just before he turned his back on them and started walking, Lord Mask looked

at her.

“...So that’s how it is. What an underhanded attack.”

The Queen did not react.

Her life had been threatened. She had no intention of acting benevolently toward her top suspect.

“I will hear directly from the Zoa—”

“Please wait, your majesty,” someone called out from the corridor.

The wave of vassals and soldiers parted. A man and a woman slowly crossed the divide.

“We were looking forward to having the conference. It has been so long. But it seems terrible things have occurred. You should tend to your own wounds first, my queen.”

The third bloodline—the Hydra.

The current head of the household was Talisman, the Wave.

He wore a dignified suit that complemented his extraordinary physique. He had deep, chiseled features and immaculate silver hair, giving the impression of a man in the prime of his life, age notwithstanding.

He snapped his fingers, and a medical care unit came running.

“If something bad happened to the queen’s fingers, it would be unthinkable. We must treat you immediately.”

“Lord Talisman, how would you suggest we deal with the Zoa?”

“This is a serious affair. Allow me to manage it. We will hear out the Zoa. I believe it will be enough to have your records department sit in.”

“You will handle the questioning? ...That is certainly a reassuring proposal.”

The Hydra were the moderates of the three families. They would have a better chance of getting the Zoa to cooperate if the Hydra smoothed everything over—rather than if the Lou subjected them to a rigorous investigation.

“Let us also cooperate in searching for the culprit. I suggest that we have

Vichyssoise take care of things.”

“Please leave it to me.”

From behind Talisman came forward a girl with flaming red hair. She was another person who had been planning to participate in the conference.

The inquisitor of the Hydra, Vichyssoise.

A girl with a stud in her left ear and a hoop in her right. Vichyssoise glared at Queen Mirabella, though she had heard this was just her nature.

...It's been such a long time since I've seen her... Her looks have changed quite a bit.

Not that she could really pinpoint the difference.

Mirabella remembered her tendency to look at the ground and her gloomy countenance. It seemed she had become more assertive in recent days.

Maybe something had given her more confidence?

“I am also in favor of Lord Talisman’s proposal.”

“...Elletear.”

“This plot was targeting you, your majesty. That is a serious crime. Comparisons can be drawn to Salinger, the transcendental sorcerer. We should mobilize the royal family to resolve this.”

Though she had small scrapes all over, Princess Elletear’s smile did not waver.

“Mother.”

“...All right. Lord Talisman, Vichyssoise, please let me out. The Hydra and Lou will use our combined powers to see this through.”

The arrangements were made immediately.

After bowing, the two from Hydra exited. Elletear left the room behind them, surrounded by a medical treatment unit.

The one who remained was the Founder’s descendant, Queen Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX.

“...I knew there would be a situation that calls for Sisbell.”

She monologued to no one. The queen was speaking to herself.

“Make haste, Alice. Bring back Sisbell. She would be able to identify the crime and our true enemy, though I imagine they will anticipate that.”

If the culprit was not from the Imperial forces, but someone within the Sovereignty...*their next target would be...*

“Alice, I am counting on you.”

2

The united stronghold. The Heavenly Empire. Or the Empire for short.

In the military state, YunmeIngen housed the ultimate decision-making organization—the Imperial Senate.

It should have been the one on the throne, but YunmeIngen was shut away in the castle, rarely offering any opinions.

That was why most would say that the ones with power came from the Eight Great Apostles, the ultimate heads of the Imperial Senate.

“Superb job, Risya. You are exceptional.”

Standing behind the podium in the assembly, the military woman sighed in response.

“...Haah .”

“Are you displeased?”

“Imagine being jostled awake in the middle of the night and summoned to this dreary place underground.”

Risya In Empire.

A tall woman wore smart black-rimmed glasses that suited her shapely face.

She was twenty-two, the same age as Mismis. Risya was a talented woman who had climbed the ladder to become a Saint Disciple. Her ascent had been swift even in Imperial history. It made sense to call her a “Genius-of-All-Trades.”

“I don’t need any special rewards or bonuses. I want a break.”

“You should appeal to the throne.”

“You serve royalty as a Saint Disciple. You are not under our jurisdiction.”

The Eight Great Apostles. Eight supervisors of the Imperial Senate.

Only the blurry outlines of their faces could be seen on monitors installed on the walls.

“I thought you would say that. What did you want to speak with me about?”

“About the special mission from a few days ago.”

“Through the research of Omen—the amalgamation of intelligence—we’ve exposed Imperial soldiers to astral energy for artificial crests. This trial was a success.”

“They got through the Sovereignty’s checkpoints. This is a wonderful accomplishment.”

Applause rang out. It was awkward—as though someone had cut out the sound from the scene of a movie and edited it back in.

“What an honor to receive your praise,” replied the Saint Disciple. “The human experiments labored hard. Of course, Nameless chose some good people.”

The special mission was to capture the Sovereign queen.

Twelve units had attempted the checkpoints. Ten had successfully gone through the borders. They were uncovering the Nebulis Sovereignty bit by bit, including the central state. Not even a century of war had managed to accomplish that.

“... I was scared shitless to be honest.”

There had been an accident that involved Iska, the successor of the Black Steel. Risyra secretly had great hopes that he would become the strongest one in the military. He had been captured by the Ice Calamity Witch before the operation.

“After you break through the Nebulis Sovereignty border, go to ground in Alcatroz and find Iska.”

Unit 907 had successfully brought Iska back.

At present, they were taking a break in the independent state of Alsamira, a desert far from the Empire. Risya hadn't bothered to look into their situation.

"Risya, you must have received the report."

One of the Eight Great Apostles firmed their voice.

"Ten units successfully invaded the Sovereignty. Among them, one reached the central state."

The nucleus of the Paradise of Witches. In the residence of the Founder descendants, in the palace, was the Planetary Stronghold.

"Were they able to enter the palace?"

"No. However, they successfully photographed the exterior of the palace and the midair garden. These match the information we received from the captured witches."

"That aside, let us talk about the main subject." The voice was cold. **"While we were executing our plan to invade the Sovereignty, something interesting occurred in the palace itself."**

"Yeah? That's the first I've heard about this."

"A plot to assassinate the queen. To put it more appropriately—a coup d'état."

"....." The Saint Disciple went silent.

It was rare to see her with a serious expression, her lightly rouged lips pursed together. That was how grave this matter was.

"You mean Nebulis IIX has gotten herself into a civil war? I have to ask to be certain, but are you sure it wasn't an Imperial attack?"

"It was the witch's own poison."

"There are those among the Founder's descendants who are dissatisfied with the queen. Although, it seems they failed this operation."

The three Nebulis bloodlines.

Risya naturally knew they weren't a monolith. At the same time, there was something that didn't ring true about this statement.

"Dissatisfied? Would that be enough to compel them to attempt an assassination?"

Behind her glasses, she looked up at the monitors on the wall, scowling.

"Can't you just tell me? There must be someone of one of the three bloodlines who supports the Empire, right? Who is it?"

"Hm?"

"Right. As a reward, we will divulge one thing to you. It's true that we receive communications directly from one of them. That is—"

"The purebred, 'Subject E.'"

The only thing Risya moved were her eyes.

She had no interest in vagaries. If they weren't going to tell her outright, they must not have been planning on sharing it with headquarters.

She was more hung up on *purebred* .

Not a vassal or an attendant. They were revealing that one of the blood relatives was tied to the Empire.

But who?

"The Sovereignty must be in pandemonium."

"Well, I suppose. Even an attempt at the queen's life would be a big deal."

"Because of that, we will continue executing our plan. It is the ideal opportunity."

Fwoom , whirred the approaching elevator in the wall behind her.

Was someone coming to the assembly? Eventually, it stopped, and the doors opened.

"Right on time."

" Welcome, Saint Disciples . This is the first time we've gathered so many of you together at once."

Five people. Risya couldn't prevent a smile from creeping onto her face when she saw the distinguished lineup.

"Oh my."

The direct reports to the throne. Top-ranking combatants.

In the eleventh seat, Garganly, the "Absent Engineer."

In the tenth seat, Sir "Omen" Karosos Newton.

In the eighth seat, Nameless, the "Invisible Hand of God."

In the fourth seat, Magnacasa, the director of headquarters.

In the third seat, Mei the "Incessant Tempest."

Risya's smile disappeared when the last person made his way off the elevator.

"...Don't you think this is a problem? The first seat?"

A tall man in a thick coat.

When she saw the man who carried a thin longsword on his shoulder, the military woman who acted as the throne's staff officer made no attempt to mask her disdain.

The first seat, Joheim, the "Flash" Knight.

He was normally stationed in the castle tower.

"The most direct report of all. Should someone who carries that responsibility be here? Should he leave his station as guard?"

"Stop right there, Risya. We asked the throne directly to have him come here."

"So that he may report back directly to the throne."

"Better for him to make the report than us."

They made up the majority of the Saint Disciples—and two were ranked above the third seat at that. What were they planning to discuss?

"We will continue the operation."

"And take advantage of the Nebulis Sovereignty's civil war."

“We have already analyzed the route to the central state. We will enter the palace and put the finishing touches on the scheme to capture the queen.”

An assassination plot against the queen brewed within the Sovereignty, while at the same time, outside their borders, a scheme was being devised to capture her.

“The Nebulis Sovereignty will fall. We have no reason to let this opportunity escape us. We request that you participate in the war.”

“Use the power of the highest-ranking combatants in the Empire to your heart’s content.”

CHAPTER 4



Mutant Star

1

Nebulis Sovereignty. Liesbaden.

The sun rose over the streets. It was still chilly this morning. The cobbled paths buzzed with activity from students and businessmen...or at least they would have during most normal circumstances.

On this day, the downtown area was hushed and deserted, as if silent from fear.

Not a single car was running. The pedestrians were sporadic.

Military police were making patrols of the pathways, carrying riot shields in their left hands, communicating over devices.

“On high alert. Even someone from the Empire can tell at a glance.”

Between the sliver of drawn curtains, Jhin observed the scene from the hotel’s ninth floor.

“The police are even on patrol in a state on the border of the Sovereignty. I think my guess is correct.”

“...This is serious!” howled a girl.

Sisbell stood still in the middle of the living area.

“Wh-what is going on? What is this?!”

She held a gossip magazine in her right hand.

Iska and Commander Mismis gave the headline a once-over.

“‘Midnight Coup d’état at the Royal Palace?! Attempts to Assassinate the Queen and Eldest Princess...?! Many Wounded.’ There is no way we can forgive this brutality!”

Her sweet eyes seemed to have lost their fervor. She was going into shock. After all, her family was in danger.

Iska and the rest of his unit couldn't comment on the coup d'état.

...She's the ruler of the enemy country. Even if there's a civil war, that's good news for the Empire.

He understood Sisbell's grief.

And though he did have sympathy for her, he did not empathize. If something happened to a witch other than Sisbell, it was no business of his.

Commander Mismis and Nene understood that, which was why they remained silent.

"So, what about you?" The silver-haired sniper leaned into the back of his chair. "They haven't found the culprit, according to the magazine. That means the palace is a dangerous place right now. Even though we don't know if there'll be a second attempt, are you sure it's wise to head over there?"

"....."

"How about we go after the culprit is caught?"

"That *is* one option. But I think it's unlikely they will catch the culprit soon enough, if at all. If we wait, your thirty-day duty will pass." Sisbell shook her head weakly. "I spoke of this before. The Nebulis Sovereignty has never been a monolith. This attack against the current administration probably wasn't spontaneous."

"...You think the culprit is involved with the royal family?" Jhin sighed dramatically. The princess stood in place. "Is it possible this is the doing of that Lord Mask guy?"

"I'm not sure. This is just a hunch, but I do not think so."

"And the reason for that?"

"He is a strategist. He is not the type of man who would choose to stage something that looks like a coup. Even if he were to target the queen, he would make it seem like nothing more than an accident... Oh, he wouldn't do that either. *Because of me.*"

“Huh?”

“If I return to the palace, they would be able to find the culprit. I do not think this is a trick by Lord Mask, because he’s aware of my powers.”

“...You can do that?” Jhin looked at her dubiously. “Is that your astral power?”

“Yes. Of course, I cannot tell you everything about it, but I am a good makeshift investigator.”

This purebred’s power was the ability to look into the past. If she could get close to the scene of the explosion, she could reproduce who had set off the attack. The culprit had no means of escape.

Iska couldn’t believe his ears as he listened to Sisbell reveal her astral power to the group.

...Are you seriously going to tell the rest of my unit about your power?! ...Why Sisbell? Wait!

Iska could think of a reason.

“I see,” Jhin clucked his tongue. “They failed at the coup. If you return, they’d be able to find the culprit. Which means that...the next target isn’t the main one, but the person who can play investigator.”

“Gah!”

Nene and Commander Mismis gulped at the same time. They finally understood why Sisbell would reveal her secret.

“There’s one more reason why someone would target me.”

Whoever had schemed to assassinate the queen would likely be after Sisbell to silence her.

“You seem calm.”

“I believe in all of you. Please protect me until I reach the central state.”

Sisbell smiled. But her shoulders were trembling.

Despite her courageous act, she was fearful. She was a tender girl. Her mother had almost been assassinated, and she could be next.

“What should we do?”

“Nothing has changed. Shuvalts should check on the state of the palace and give us a report. We will wait until then.”

They were on standby for now. With bated breath, they would hide in the hotel.

At the same time, Alice was walking toward the terminal station, taking long strides.

“...This is serious. A coup at the palace, they say!”

She didn't bother with the disguise from the other day.

Her prided golden hair was flowing straight down her back, and she was outfitted in a luxurious dress. She wore a lily crest, the symbol of the House of Lou, on a chain around her right wrist. Her status was on full display to curtail any unnecessary labor required for verifying her identity.

“Are you...Lady Aliceliese?!”

The military police keeping watch on the walkways raised their riot shields when they saw the beautiful princess, all of them saluting at once.

“Let me through. The terminal has not been blockaded, has it?”

“I-it has not. Though there are fewer trains, the express to the central state is still running!”

“Thank you.” Her golden hair rippled in waves as she passed by the police. “Rin, come.”

“P-please wait, Lady Alice! ...Even if we get there early, the train will still come at the same time.”

“How do you expect me to remain calm?”

“The queen is a top-class astral mage. After failing at a coup, the culprit will bide their time before they act again.”

Rin was pulling a large cart with each hand, tailing Alice. They had packed up in a hurry after they had received the news that morning.

“Rin, I’m making the right decision, aren’t I?”

“I support your decision to immediately return home. With you back in the palace, the enemy will feel pressured to act again sooner than later.”

Alice would turn a blind eye to Sisbell’s affairs. There was no change in that plan.

That was irrelevant to the civil war and coup. She was only doing it to prevent others from noticing she had been aware that her sister had hired an Imperial unit as guards. Even if Sisbell’s collusion came to light, it would not result in the downfall of the queen.

“I hate to ask, but is Lady Sisbell safe?”

“...I’ll leave her well-being to Iska. It pains me to think he’s serving her, but I can’t concern myself with that right now.”

Iska is my rival, not Sisbell’s personal guard.

Though she wasn’t happy they were together, Alice’s mind was more composed than yesterday.

...Maybe I’m calmer because we were able to talk alone? ...Though I was embarrassed to cling to his arm like that.

She had been close enough to Iska to rival her sister’s experience with him. She felt she had done enough to make him remember that she existed.

...I only did it because she did it first!

...Iska’s arm felt so strong.

She could still feel it in her hands and chest.

Though he was slender, he was very muscular—like Rin, but sturdier. Alice had felt a different sense of security when she entrusted her weight to him.

He had been warm. When she touched him, it felt like she was burning up with every heartbeat.

She had wanted to press herself against him forever, making her whole body melt— “Lady Alice.”

“Wait, no! You’ve got it wrong! S-Sisbell committed the sin first...and...”

“What was that? What sin?” Rin looked serious, cocking her head to the side.

Her outburst had been so loud that the police gaped at her.

“Please lower your voice when talking about your sister.”

“I-I know. We’re almost at the terminal—”

They were at a four-way crosswalk. As soon as Alice stopped in front of the flickering traffic light, her communications device went off in her vice grip.

A call?

Was it from one of the queen’s agents in the district? She put the device to her ear.

“Alice, are you all right?”

“——— Mother?!”

She couldn’t recall the queen ever contacting her directly.

...I mean, this is an ordinary communication device, which could be tapped. She doesn’t use these on principle...

And yet, she had contacted her daughter. What were the queen’s intentions?

“I-I hope *you* are the one who’s all right. Are you safe?” She hid in a nook of the walkway as Rin stood watch. “I heard word of a bomb in your chambers and that Elletear was in danger, too.”

“It wasn’t a bomb but an astral attack. There were no traces of gunpowder.”

“.....I see.”

Magic flames would immediately dissipate.

If it had been a bomb, they would have found vestiges of charred components, but with an astral attack, no evidence was left behind. Under normal circumstances, one would just throw their hands up in defeat.

“It works in our favor.” There was no hesitation in her voice.

She didn’t act like she had been the target of an attempted assassination ten hours earlier.

“If it were a bomb, it would have been possible to control it remotely. An

astral attack has limited range. We will be able to identify the attacker's identity using Sisbell's powers. This is a good opportunity."

"To cull evil?"

"An internal purge is a painful process. The top suspect is Lord Mask, but we must consider the possibility of it being someone else."

"...Someone else?"

"We should presume anything is possible. And the royal family knows about Sisbell's powers. The attack was a failure, so we must be vigilant of the culprit switching targets."

They might switch to Sisbell. Alice had presumed that.

"Have you found your sister's whereabouts?"

"Uh."

Alice had an obligation as a daughter. However, if she told the truth, her entire family would be in danger.

".....Not yet..."

"Hasten your search. When I was attacked, I had a means of self-defense, but her astral powers would not allow her to contend with an assassin."

"...Yes."

That wasn't entirely true. No one other than herself knew.

The circumstances surrounding Sisbell had changed more than the queen could have imagined.

...She hired an Imperial unit for self-defense...which I cannot tell my mother, lest it compromise her position.

That guard was the former Saint Disciple Iska. He wouldn't lose in an attack launched at Sisbell. That was why Alice could pretend she didn't know about her affairs.

"Then I will take my leave, mother. Please do be careful."

"I leave her in your care." The transmission ended.

At the same time, Alice let out a long sigh and looked up.

“How sad. I’ve never lied to my mother before.”

“That’s not true. When you don’t want to go to morning reading groups, you claim you have a debilitating migraine.”

“Rin.”

“...A slip of the tongue.” Rin had ruined the mood.

“Well, it’s fine. I need your help.” She beckoned her attendant to the alley. “As you heard, I can’t go back to the central state because my mother wants me to look for my sister here.”

Because of that, Alice had to change her course again.

“My sister is still staying in the hotel. You will go back immediately.”

“...To follow her?”

“To watch over my sister. And make sure you are not found out.”

To find Sisbell and protect her. To pretend she knew nothing about her actions.

It was impossible to achieve both goals, which was why *Alice was going to remove herself from guarding Sisbell.*

...Rin is originally my guard, after all... At our training tower, she mastered a broad range of things—from spying to assassination.

At any rate, Alice couldn’t do it. It was impossible for an amateur to guard someone in secret. That required specialized skill.

“We will work separately. I will take over the carts and wait at the terminal. If something happens, inform me immediately.”

“Of course. Lady Alice—” Relieved from the luggage, Rin looked at her in earnest. “If the queen and Lady Sisbell are targeted, we do not know if you will be next. Please be careful.”

Then she turned around, slicing through the air with her shoulders as she rushed forward.

After Alice watched her go, the princess started walking.

“...The last time my mother was targeted, it was by Salinger.”

It was the second time this grave crime had been committed in their history. Perhaps the mastermind behind this second attack was a force to be reckoned with just like the perpetrator of the original incident was, a person with just as much power and evil?

“But someone at the same level as Salinger...there aren’t many in the royal family. Who could it have been?”

2

The umbral winds raged. It was the time of night when the high-rise buildings had an inky tint to their coloration. A full day had passed since the coup targeting the queen. There had been no new developments.

“Good news, everyone. Shuvalts has reached the central state!” Sisbell’s voice rang in the hotel room, which was rare. “He should be able to have an audience with the queen tomorrow. If we get her help, we should be able to secure a safe passage back!”

“‘Should’, huh? That inspires no confidence.”

“...You’re such a downer.” Sisbell scowled at Jhin.

There was no way he didn’t notice, but he refused to meet her eyes, looking up at the ceiling instead.

“I’m saying don’t get excited. Be level. Think of what to do when things don’t work out as planned.”

“...I know.” Sisbell sat down on the sofa, looking displeased.

Though the sofa was large enough to fit four fully grown adults, she squeezed next to Iska, who was perched in the corner.

...If this was yesterday, I would have asked her why she was sitting next to me... But there’s nothing I can do about it now. I can’t reject her.

Even next to him, her nervousness was painfully obvious. The attempt on the

queen's life weighed heavily on her.

"Hey, what should we do today? You patrolled around the hotel yesterday, right?" Nene suddenly got up from the carpet. "We can't tell what's going on outside from the hotel room. I don't think we'll be able to see people's faces once it gets dark. Should we go outside?"

"...Not today. The military police are keeping a lookout." Sisbell sighed.

The street outside the glass walls were illuminated with pinpricks of light at night.

"Though I'm worried about what is happening outside, we should remain patient and wait. Let us endure until Shuvalts is able to contact the queen—"

She was cut off.

DRRRR! An explosion rang out, echoing around the walls of the hotel room. The reinforced glass wall didn't crack, but the table and chairs in the living area trembled from the shockwave.

"Ah! ...Wh-what was that?!" Sisbell had fallen on her rear and sank onto the carpet.

Out on the street, a pedestrian crossing not even a hundred yards from the hotel had been engulfed in flames of a fantastical violet color that was beyond imagination.

The vivid purple embers bloomed into a large flower in the night sky.

"An astral attack...?" Mismis asked.

"That wasn't a bomb. Commander, that was astral flame!" Nene shouted.

Their voices overlapped. The embers floated above scattering flashes, glittering with magic.

...An explosion...powered by astral energy...like the one from the coup yesterday!

Sisbell's lips had turned blue from fear.

Was the person who assaulted the queen now in the eighth state?

"The military police are running over. Maybe they found the culprit in the

streets tonight and the person started to rampage?”

“I-in that case, we should pursue them!” Sisbell forced herself to stand on her shaking knees. “I told you about my astral powers. Even if the culprit has fled, it’s possible to go after them. If we find their identity and inform the military police, that will guarantee my safety.”

“Y-you want to head over...?!” Commander Mismis gripped her taser with both small hands.

“We’re not fighting, Sisbell.” Iska spoke to her from behind, following the witch to the door. “We just need to figure out their identity and location, right? We don’t need to engage in combat ourselves.”

“Yes, we just need to inform the military police. That will be our plan.”

They headed to the passageway. The other guests had heard the commotion, spilling out into the hallway, crowding around the elevator.

“Ugh, I can’t believe this place is packed with onlookers... Let’s use the stairs!”

The princess started running down the emergency stairs. By the time she reached the lobby on the first floor, she was already out of breath.

“You okay?”

“Y-yes...but this works in our favor. Look around the lobby—the guests have come down to see what’s happening. We can disappear into the crowd.”

They headed outdoors, where the streets were lit by streetlamps. The police weren’t around because they had headed to the scene of the crime.

“Iska, there’s still astral energy over there.” Nene pointed at the night sky.

That was when the shadow of night was pierced by another explosive attack.

“N-not again!”

And it was even larger than the previous one. It was intense enough to make all the guests exiting the hotel scatter like baby spiders.

“Is the culprit fighting the police?”

“It’s possible. We must hurry, Iska!” She cut through the sidewalk, heading to the other side of the street.

They wove between the buildings, progressing by alleyway, and ran all the way to the site of the explosion. Embers rose in the air. Ahead, there wasn't a single person standing on their own two feet.

"Wha...?!" A shriek escaped the witch princess.

The military police had collapsed. They were lying on the cold roadway with riot shields still in hand or otherwise slumped against the building walls.

It wasn't just the military police.

"The queen's agents...!"

Men and women wearing suits were trapped under the military police. Iska couldn't tell the difference between them and civilians, but if Sisbell was insisting they were the queen's agents, then there was no mistaking it.

...If they're the queen's soldiers.....were they attacked during their search for Sisbell?

He unlocked a long case. Iska then brought out his astral swords, glowering at his surroundings. Maybe he would get lucky and no one would approach them within the flitting embers. He would know immediately if anyone suspicious appeared.

"Sisbell."

"Y-yes!" The princess put her hand to her chest, trying to concentrate on her breathing and closing her eyes.

"Please show me your past, dear planet—"

"Found *you*..."

There came a low whisper.

It was pure luck that Iska had managed to hear it. The wind from the buildings above swept the sound down from the rooftop.

"Sisbell, look up!"

On the very edge of the building's rooftop, a lone figure was floating, looking down at them.

"Uh... Is that the uniform of the astral corps?!"

“Look closely, boss. It looks similar, but it’s different.” Jhin turned the muzzle of his gun at it. “...There’s no mistake—that’s the culprit.”

The person was wearing battle robes and a hood over their head.

The uniform cloth was even thicker than those of the astral corps, dotted with purple spots that looked poisonous. The figure wore thick gloves that left three of their fingers uncovered.

...They look taller than me... But if the soles of their shoes are thicker, I can’t tell their gender.

He couldn’t identify their age or sex. In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if it was a mechanical soldier under all those clothes. Their garments looked off.

“Sisbell, is that person from the Sovereignty?”

“N-no... I’ve never seen them before. They’re not from the astral corps. Or the elite guards of the royal family.” Sisbell audibly gulped.

She gripped her hands into fists, resolved to do or die.

“You barbarian!” Sisbell yelled. “You attacked respectable public forces and the queen’s agents. You will not be absolved of your crimes!”

“.....”

“I can guess you are in a position close to the royal family. If I am here—”

“Get crushed.” The attacker turned their fingertips toward her.

Feeling the invisible pressure gathering above his head, Iska scooped up Sisbell in his arms.

“Jump!” His voice was squelched by the mass that came down on them.

As he carried the princess, Iska charged forward. Jhin went backward. Nene and Commander Mismis threw themselves to the side of the formation.

Crack. The stone paving that Iska was standing on split.

“Was that wind? But I didn’t hear anything...which means...”

“It’s gravity!” Sisbell managed to shriek as Iska made their landing. “It’s a wave of astral power created by manipulating undulations. There’s no mistake

the military police were crushed by it!”

“We’ve seen that in the battlefield, too.”

It could function as an invisible trap. If it was strong, it could even pin a running military vehicle to the ground. It was comparable to a spider’s web. If someone were to get tangled in the gravitational net, rendered immobilized, the mages could combine forces to attack with flame or ice.

“Get away from here, Sisbell.”

“Huh?! Iska?!”

He thrust the witch princess back. He knew he was rough handling her. However, he didn’t have many options. The assailant was that powerful.

...Gravity is invisible. I can barely tell where it is based on aerial movements... It would be impossible to protect her and react in time.

And then there was that destructive force.

It had managed to break the stone pavement. It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to call it a one-hit KO. If the mass of gravity were dropped on his head, Iska would have lost consciousness.

...And this attack is different from the violet blasts from earlier. Are there two attackers or more?

“Grab on!” Mismis urged.

“I’m going to pull, Commander!” Nene said.

The captain had extended a hand to the staggering princess, as Nene yanked on Mismis to pull their ward into the shadow of the building. She was now out of the vicinity of the gravitational attacks.

“Jhin!”

“Don’t yell, boss. You’re going to give me away. Whatever. They’ve got no defense anyway.”

Behind Iska, the sniper had disappeared into the shadows, swallowing his breath and fixing his aim with the handgun in his right hand.

“Gravity is meaningless against bullets.”

The projectiles tore through the night. They bit into the shoulder, chest, and ribs of the assailant, coming out of the darkness. The attacker collapsed. Though the uniform must have been bulletproof, it didn't absorb the full impact.

"Huh? Oh, you got them? At that distance...?"

In her hiding place, Sisbell was stunned.

"H-how did you do that in this darkness?! Don't you need night goggles?!"

"Shut up and hide." Jhin shot a fourth time.

The bullet zipped directly to the rooftop, slicing through the assailant's right leg. The staggering figure veered forward.

"Choose. I can either pump you full of holes or you can *fall*."

"*Urk.*" The unidentified assailant leaped down—from rooftop to the stone pavement a few yards below.

The impact from the free fall should have fractured every bone in their legs, but it was softened by a manipulating gravity.

However, their slow descent made them sword fodder.

"*Be trodden.*"

"Too slow." Iska stepped forward with his drawn sword.

He accounted for the attacker's nimble retreat, slashing diagonally through the cloth using his black astral sword and slicing through the neck guard. It flew into the air. His blade even contacted the skin underneath...when he felt something strange.

A shiver went through his entire body.

"What?!"

The lack of resistance from the tip of the blade had given him a fright. Iska stopped his blade. It hadn't been caused by the fibers of the clothing.

It wasn't the firmness of human muscle either. It felt like cutting through water.

“I-Iska! Is this the time to go easy on someone? You could have beaten him!”

“.....”

“Iska?”

He had no reply for the princess. Even he had no explanation.

He had never experienced that instantaneous chill and the sensation at the tip of his sword before.

“You.”

“Oh...you cut my neck guard. I can’t use it anymore.”

The assailant tore away the partially shredded seam of the hood, yanking off the mask over their face.

“Four of you in total, huh? For impromptu guards, they’re good. Who could you all be?”

It was...a red-haired witch.

She wore a stud in her right ear and a large hoop in her left. Her eyes seemed to challenge them. She looked like the unruly type. When she removed her glove, the hand underneath appeared so slender and dainty, Iska doubted his eyes.

...She’s petite under those clothes...not as small as the commander or Sisbell, but she’s got to be shorter than Nene.

The witch waved her hand at someone behind Iska.

“Hey, little Sisbell. Looks like you’ve finally come out of that room.”

“Vichyssoise, is that you?!”

“The eighth state is rather large. Even finding a little kid like you turned into a huge ordeal. I thought drawing you out would be easier than looking for you.”
The witch winked.

Putting on a friendly smile, Vichyssoise the witch planted her feet on the heads of the collapsed queen’s agents. It was almost as though she had found the perfect place to stand.

“...Stay back!” Sisbell thrust her hand in front of her. “I do not know why you’re after me, but it’s no use. The military police will eventually come to investigate the blast. I’m sure that onlookers will come in droves.”

“_____”

“You must be wearing that getup to hide that you are the inquisitor from Hydra, right? If you attack me here, you will clearly be named the prime culprit behind the coup.”

Vichyssoise had taken the care to hide her face with a hood and mask and to wear gloves over her hands. There was no doubt she had been trying to hide her identity.

“If they find out, you would put your family in a difficult position—”

“I won’t be found out.”

“What?”

“I’ll show you a real treat , Sisbell.”

The gravel split. The redheaded witch casually took a step onto broken stone, and then another. Iska went backward.

“Do not get close to her ,” he warned.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Iska?!”

“It’s dangerous. Commander Mismis, make sure Sisbell doesn’t go out in front. Get ready to withdraw immediately.”

“Wh-what are you saying, Iska?! This is your duty!”

He didn’t have time to reply to Sisbell.

The witch in front of his eyes...seemed to radiate something strange—a chill that was different from the Founder Nebulis and the Ice Calamity Witch. He had felt it ever since he cut her with his astral sword.

...She’s unharmed... How could she not have a scratch on her, even after I cut through her shoulder and neck guards?!

The redhead stopped walking.

In the valley between buildings...the dark alleyway, the moonlight resembling the sun between the trees...

“Dearest Sisbell, let me predict the headlines tomorrow: ‘The Youngest Princess Sisbell, Attacked by Mysterious Monster.’”

“What?”

“Did you forget? Or did you block it from your mind?” She grinned. “Didn’t *the monster in the palace* look a little something like this?”

Her laugh reverberated through the moonlit town. Violet flames flared up and engulfed Vichyssoise’s whole body.

“What?!”

The mottled clothing burned away as the red-haired witch stood in place. Though she was engulfed by flames, she was not burned. The reason for that was very simple.

The violet flames were rising from her skin.

The Mutant Star, “Test Subject Vi.”

She started to change.

Her red hair stood on end before their eyes, like a red gemstone, like soldered metal. Her skin turned transparent, like a jellyfish. They could see the night sky through her body.

Human muscle and skin could not turn transparent like a ghost.

In short...*she was not human.*

What had been birthed was a monster beyond any known mortal race.

“Uh. W-wait.....”

“Wh-what is that, Jhin?!” Nene shouted.

“...This isn’t what we discussed when you hired us,” Jhin rasped.

Even the sniper who had studied under the strongest Imperial swordsman with Iska could only gape at this mutant birth before his eyes.

“We promised to fight Sovereign assassins, not a monster.”

“.....Uh.....ahh.....uhh?!”

As for Sisbell... Her entire body trembled. She was unable to make a single sound.

“—Whew. Remember now? See, there’s no problem if there are witnesses. My prey for tonight is you. Next, the queen.”

With traces of Vichyssoise’s features still in its face, the thing smiled, stretching out its hands.

“The planet is flooding with fury. We have no need for a bloodline that cannot destroy the Empire.”

Violet flames. Fire spouted from that brilliant body, scorching the night sky. However, she should have only had one power: gravity.

“...Vichyssoise, what are those flames?!”

“These? Amalgamations of astral energy. The flames that burned the Imperial capital to ash a century ago—the ones that refuse to be extinguished with water or cold. They rage on.”

The purple pillar burst into a wall of flames as high as the surrounding buildings. As it engulfed rubble and stone, it rushed toward them.

“Goodbye, Lou bloodline—and your guards.” The inhuman witch snapped her fingers. “We will take the Sovereignty.”

“—I would never let you do as you please.”

The violet flames disappeared with a black flash.

“But Sisbell is another matter. I’m not handing her over to you.”

“—Huh?!” The witch’s smile froze over.

The inextinguishable astral flame had disappeared...or had been sliced down. The swordsman had used his black sword to protect Sisbell as the wall of flames drew closer.

“You stopped my attack...?” Vichyssoise was dubious.

“Iska!” The witch princess shouted in excitement.

Their reactions were diametric opposites. Iska looked down at the split flames.

The violet fire scattered in all directions, releasing embers that clung to the pavement and scorched the surface of the stone, melting it.

“Take her.”

From far away...he entrusted Sisbell to Mismis, Nene, and Jhin in a whisper.

“Iska! Y-you said you’re a swordsman who specializes in astral mages. That wasn’t a lie, right...? Don’t lose!”

Her voice was swept away by the wind. Showered with desperate pleas from behind, Iska did not turn around. He couldn’t take his eyes off this monster even for a moment.

“...I’m not so sure about that.”

His whispers didn’t reach the distant princess.

“I wouldn’t lose to an astral mage. But this monster is a first for me.”

He’d never seen anything like it.

...I’ve never called anyone a witch before...but she seems to fit the bill...

The witch Vichyssoise.

He faced the girl transformed into an inhuman monster. He could feel sweat trickle down his spine.

“I can’t lose to an astral mage. I can be stubborn.”

“Oh? Then you can give up.” Vichyssoise turned to the skies. “I’m not an astral mage. I’m not something at that level.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He had the black astral sword in his right hand. He gripped the white sword in his left.

Iska exhaled.

“I don’t *want* to lose to a witch like you.”

“Hm?”

“As soon as my blade touched you, I realized you’re an inhuman monster. But

—”

“But what?”

“Even though you’ve boasted that you’re not an astral mage, I don’t feel any additional power from you other than astral power.”

“?”

“I see it’s going over your head.”

“Right, you probably can’t comprehend it.”

Ice Calamity Witch Aliceliese.

The Founder Nebulis.

Kissing of Thorns.

The purebreds were formidable foes ready to lay down their lives on the battlefield. And *all of them had been human*.

And yet, they were prepared to be called “witches” by the Imperial forces for making use of their powers. Because of that, they were considered ghastly presences.

“I’m the astral mage your Empire calls the Ice Calamity Witch.”

“I’ve known this for a century. This world is full of scars, and it doesn’t have anything resembling heroes or a savior. For that reason, I’ve become a witch—to drive the Empire into extinction.”

“Even a girl who’s just human derides herself as a ‘witch.’ You can’t even imagine the resolution it takes to do that.”

“...?”

“I don’t want to lose—not to someone who’s *only* powerful.”

The night alley was lit by the violet flames.

An alarm went off in the distance, but Iska was taking on an unprecedented battle.

It was a true battle...between a human and a witch.

CHAPTER 5



Stage Three: Uniting Humans with Astral Power

1

Nebulis Sovereignty. Liesbaden.

South Altoría terminal was nothing like it had been on any normal night. Gone were relative silence and the soft slumbering sounds of people as the deserted place blared with a piercing alarm.

“Wh-what was that, Jhin?! What was that witch?!”

“No clue. Hurry, Boss. Nene, you too.”

Cutting through the sidewalks in the dead of night, Jhin headed toward the hotel.

The rubberneckers were crowded around the lobby. Pushing past them, they ran down the hallway and headed to the emergency stairs again.

“Even if I go to back up Iska, I can’t do anything with this small handgun. Hey, Nene, you’ve got an anti-armor magnum hidden in the case, right?”

“But Jhin, that handgun was made to handle beasts—not people!”

“She looked like a beast to me. We shouldn’t think of her as human.”

She was something far outside the realm of humanity.

She wasn’t one of the astral mages, whom the Imperial forces were intimately familiar with. She was an opponent, but a new type of enemy. They had to face her as though there was no other option but to use their most lethal weapons.

“Don’t tell me she’s your secret weapon in Nebulis.”

“.....”

“Hey.”

“...Stop joking around.”

At the landing of the emergency stairs, the strawberry blond stopped right in her tracks.

Sweat streamed from her forehead. The Sovereign witch was pale, hair in disarray.

“That woman... Vichyssoise Alek Hydra is related to the royal family, but she is not what the Imperial forces would call a purebred. Her blood is too ‘thin.’”

“What does that mean?”

“She was adopted. The Hydra family welcomed a child with a distant relation to the bloodline. She wants to be an inquisitor, the one who judges criminals. Anyone in the royal family knows that, but...”

“You didn’t know that monster?”

“...If I had, I would not have tried to pursue her.”

Sisbell’s knees knocked together as she leaned on the handrail, unable to go up the stairs, either from exhaustion or fear.

“...I’ve seen another monster like Vichyssoise once.”

“Huh?” Commander Mismis had automatically chimed in. “Why didn’t you tell us something that important—?”

“No! I-I had no idea. I mean, you saw...how Vichyssoise transformed. There’s no way I could have known that some run-of-the-mill person was actually hiding their true form!”

“It’s fine. We’ll look into the monsters later,” Jhin sighed. “We’re heading back to the room.”

“Eek?” Sisbell yipped, when Jhin silently scooped her up in his arms. “Wh-what do you think you’re doing?! How dare you touch me without asking for permission—”

“Can you run on your own?”

“...No.”

The girl timidly grabbed his shoulders. Rather than trying to go up the stairs on her own tired feet, it would be much faster to be carried by him.

“What do you suppose the chances are of that monster following us here?” Jhin asked.

“...It’s not impossible. There won’t be any military police who can tell it’s Vichyssoise at a glance. Even if she is caught on surveillance cameras, once she returns to human form, we can’t do anything about it.”

“Makes sense.” Jhin sprinted up the emergency stairs, skipping one step at a time. “Once we get back to the room, we’re splitting into two groups. You stay with Nene and the boss. Do not go outside under any circumstances. I’ll go back up Iska.”

“Okay... That thing is no longer one of our own. I must report to my mother as soon as possible.”

“To your mother?”

“N-nothing! Don’t mind me, and let’s hurry!”

“Then you better hold on tight.” He ran full speed up the stairs. He didn’t realize he was carrying the queen’s daughter on his back.

“The leaders of the Empire are horrible,” he said in a stifled voice. “But when it comes to dark schemes, Nebulis’s bloodline puts up a good fight.”

Isn’t it beautiful?

The night wind carried the beguiling chuckle.

“Hair like gems. A glass body.”

Had it mutated from a human...or had its disguise come undone to reveal a monster?

The thing with crystalized ruby hair opened her arms wide.

“...Are you human?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Tell me, guard. What makes a human?” Vichyssoise crossed her arms.

Her curvy body was feminine and faintly glowing. He could see the night sky through it behind her.

"I'll revise my question," he offered.

"What?"

"Were you born that way?"

The witch did not answer. Instead, she uncrossed her arms, pointing the tip of her finger at Iska.

"Little Sisbell called you Iska. Who are you?"

"A guard from an independent state."

"That's not what I meant.' How do you like that phrase now?" The witch clad in astral flames chuckled. "Isn't that the name of the eleventh Saint Disciple? The swordsman? The one called the Successor of the Black Steel? I'm asking whether you are that person."

"Uh."

"The Hydra have persisted for a century. Though it is in a period of obscurity, it still is knowledgeable about the Imperial forces."

"...So you're after the throne, huh?"

"How base."

The air popped as purple flames spouted from her entire body.

"Who would quit being human for such a trivial cause?"

The flame bloomed into a flower, the embodiment of the astral energy within Vichyssoise.

"Violet Asteroid Belt."

Hellfire swelled into a fireball large enough to swallow him whole.

The flames couldn't be extinguished with water or ice. Because of that, the Imperial capital had burned to the ground a century ago. The fire wouldn't disappear until the astral energy dissipated.

"Kindly burn to a crisp."

His vision was arrested. There were buildings on both sides of the road. The mass of flames was coming closer in front of him. Behind him were the

collapsed military police.

...Is she...going to burn everything in her path?!

He could dodge it.

With the speed of the flames, he just needed to get away before it made impact. That was incredibly easy. No one would have blamed him if Iska had done that.

“Doesn’t the Sovereignty mean anything to you?”

He kicked off the ground, bringing down the black astral sword to cut through it.

It made contact. It was like a balloon had burst. The astral flames popped, turning into countless embers that fluttered in the sky.

“Hah! I knew I was right about that sword!” shouted the witch. “To extinguish astral flames, the only thing you can do is counterbalance it with equal power. I wonder at the cunning behind the Imperial forces that enable this to happen.”

“Who knows?”

“But in the end, all you’ve got is a sword. You can’t do anything.” The witch thrust out her right hand.

Dozens of fireballs floated in the air and were aimed at Iska. She pointed at him. It was like a meteor shower.

“You can’t just cut one. Not with this many flames.”

“You’ll need thousands.”

“What?!”

“If you intend to stop me, that is. That was true for Alice.”

All he did was *go forward* .

He glanced at the trajectory of the purple fireballs and swung his astral sword. He severed the flames that were raining down toward his head and used his momentum to mow down the next attack, dodging the assault.

Iska ran along the ground without stopping for an instant. He headed for the

witch in front of his eyes.

“You’re rather monstrous for a human.”

“Right back at you.”

To Iska, she was an unknown witch.

The witch herself wasn’t sure what to make of this haphazard swordsman, charging between her astral flames. He was undoubtedly going to collide with her.

...I’ve figured out something... Even though her appearance and powers are different from a human’s, she still uses human tactics.

She was like the other purebreds.

It seemed like Iska had defended against the first attack. She tried to pin him with an overpowering assault. It must have been ingrained into her that this was the best way to handle one-on-one combat.

“Praise to Mother Earth.”

Below the witch’s feet swelled a black dome, a distorted gravitational field with the appearance of a cocoon.

“It’s a gravitational storm.”

The earth rumbled. The stone pavement let out a violent screech. The surface cobwebbed, turning into gigantic fissures before his eyes.

Like the eye of a storm, the gravity was pulling in everything around it.

“I’ve got you.”

“You’re got it wrong.”

He *landed* on the building wall.

Right before he would have been caught by the gravity storm, Iska had leaped outside of its range. The wild beast gaped at him in disbelief.

Thump.

Kicking off the building walls in a triangular pattern, he launched himself to an edifice across the street. He brought his sword down, aiming for the top of the

witch's head—when Iska felt a bottomless pressure...on his skin.

He felt the violet glitter that emanated from the witch's entire body.

“Gah?!”

It would have only taken two more seconds for his sword to reach her.

Though he had closed the distance between them to that point, Iska stopped in his tracks. He kicked off a streetlamp pole and changed his trajectory to land far away from the witch.

“Aha. Ha-ha-ha. You're good. This will be great practice for crushing the Zoa and the Lou.”

Fwip . The inhuman girl turned around.

Her eyes *were on fire* . No exaggeration. Her eyes had hardened into jewels like her hair, pumping out astral flames.

...Are they getting stronger? ...Are her powers just flooding out of her, unable to be contained?

“I'm getting tired of seeing your face. I need to find Sisbell.” The witch looked at him with upturned eyes. “I'll go all out. Once you've had your fill, you will perish.”

2

Just a few minutes before Iska and Vichyssoise's battle.

In the terminal station of South Altoria, Alice ran, out of breath, along the main road leading to the shopping district. It was the same road where she had seen Iska and Sisbell holding hands yesterday.

“What is going on? What was that explosion...?!”

Violet flames.

Against the canvas of night, the fire had raged for a moment before disappearing.

This was a nation of astral mages. Many had understood what it was at first

glance. That hadn't been gunpowder. It had been the blinding flash of astral energy.

...And that direction is...Sisbell's hotel.

No way.

With a shiver, she recalled the explosion that had occurred during the attempt at the queen's life in the Nebulis palace. She certainly knew there was a possibility her sister might be next.

"But Iska should be with her. And Rin is there, too..."

Iska was her sister's guard. And Rin should have been observing the two from close by.

"The communications device's signal is yellow...which means she's in the middle of something."

If it were green, she would be able to call like normal. Red meant she was in the middle of a communication. As for yellow, that meant her transmissions had been restricted.

Some circumstance must have made Rin set herself to "busy" mode and temporarily restrict communications from Alice.

"...Ugh. That means I've got to go and check it out for myself!"

She caught her breath and started running again.

The explosion had quieted, but the average citizens had started congregating outside. The military police were cracking down on them.

"You! Over there! Stop!"

"It's me. Please fill me in."

"Princess Aliceliese?!" The military police immediately saluted when they saw her face under the streetlamps and the royal chain around her wrist.

"Please hurry."

"Y-yes, ma'am! We're currently in the midst of our investigation. However, the units that headed to the scene have stopped responding... Reinforcements are heading there now."

“Where were they when they cut off communication?”

“A-at the fourteenth block up ahead! And another unit—four people—went there to investigate something that seemed like an explosion of astral power. We can’t get in contact with them either.”

“...So them, too.”

It was the same for Alice. She could no longer get in contact with the queen’s agents.

On top of that, Rin had limited her communications.

“You’re the leader here? Put a halt on the reinforcements. Devote yourself to halting any civilians from going near the scene.”

“Pardon? Wh-why would you like us to do that?”

“I’m going to head over to take a look. I think that will be the fastest way to figure out what is happening. I will be able to unite with Rin there, too, I think.”

“You are going yourself, Princess?!”

“Please. This is part of the royal family’s duties. I will just take a quick look around.” Alice responded with a reserved smile.

...Seriously? Use your brain... If you were with me, you would just get in the way of my astral powers. You wouldn’t want that, right?

She imagined the worst-case scenario.

If this was the culprit behind the coup... If they were attacking Sisbell with that explosion...then she would be pursued by the assailant.

“H-however...”

“I will cooperate. Give me ten minutes? If you do not hear back from me within that time, then please send in reinforcements.”

“...All right. I agree to those conditions. Please be careful.”

“Thank you. Please be safe.” She started sprinting again without waiting for a response.

Ten minutes wasn’t that short. In mock battles between astral mages, there

were records of matches being settled, on average, in two minutes. It was ample time to defeat the culprit once she found them.

“It was over here, right? Rin? Rin? If you’re here, answer me!”

The fourteenth block.

There wasn’t much light in the alleys between old buildings. She went in deeper.

Alice picked up the smell of cinders.

“...Are the flames still smoldering?”

“Lady Alice! You’re safe!”

From a secluded path, a woman in a suit jogged up to her. She had black hair, in her mid-twenties.

Alice noticed her collar. She wore a custom lapel pin of a lily coat of arms that had a chain hanging off it. It was worn by all the queen’s agents.

“We had found Lady Sisbell! But the enemy attack... Though we tried to deal with it, the police were taken hostage and Lady Sisbell was wounded.”

“Continue.”

“We do not have time. I will lead you there. Follow me, Lady Alice!”

“Yes.” Alice didn’t move.

When the agent realized the princess was not following her into the darkness, she turned around.

“...Lady Alice?”

“I have something I’d like to ask you.”

“We are in a race against time! While we are here—”

“Who are you?”

The woman in the suit went tight-lipped.

Alice crossed her arms on the spot. “Did you think I wouldn’t recognize every soldier’s face? I’m sad if I’ve made that impression.”

“.....”

“When the queen interviews her agents, it is my role to be present. I haven’t forgotten a single name or face that has served the House of Lou.”

The woman had disguised herself as a Lou agent. Though Alice did not recognize her, she could guess her affiliation and goal.

...Did she want to drag me into a narrow alleyway...and attack me by surprise? The other option, I suppose, was to make me spit out Sisbell’s location.

Or maybe it was both.

“I should thank you. I learned something,” she said with a large helping of satire. “Sisbell is still safe. If you had her captured, you wouldn’t have turned to me. You would have focused on evading the eyes of the police and disappeared, right?”

“.....”

“Retreat. It’s only customary for a buffoon to make their escape once their intentions have been revealed.”

“Very insightful, princess.” The lapel pin whizzed through the air.

She had torn off the proof of loyalty from her suit collar. That act signaled her disloyalty for the current queen.

“You are cleverer than they say, and intuitive. And beautiful.”

“Thank you. But I don’t want your flattery. I’d like you to get out of the way.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to turn you down. Princess! En garde!” The woman’s suit opened.

The small muzzle of a handgun was turned toward Alice.

“Huh, a gun.”

Really now? Alice’s ice wall could repel an onslaught from an entire Imperial unit.

A handgun didn’t strike any fear in her. Any Sovereign subject would know that. In that case, was this person aiming for something else? But what else was there? Was it a diversion? A trap?

This momentary hesitation dulled Alice's judgment.

"Farewell, princess."

The bullet grazed Alice's side.

By the time she realized that it was no ordinary bullet and that the rubber pellet had hit a detonator behind her, three flashes of light had already gone off.

Beep, beep, beep. The signals sounded off in succession.

"—Gh! No way!"

It was a trio of chained explosions.

The plastic explosives attached to three buildings around her destroyed the walls and the stone pavement, blowing them to smithereens. A thick cloud of dust enshrouded the place.

Between the ribbons of smoke, she could see everything had been blown away, other than the steel bars hanging off the structures.

"A trap to blow the military police to bits. I never thought I'd be able to use it against the Founder's bloodline."

The streetlamps had been decimated. With the heaping pile of rubble in front of her, the woman put away her gun.

"Vi is continuing her pursuit of the youngest princess... She's late. How long is that going to take? All she needs to do is handle the guards."

She turned around. As she tried to start walking, her feet stopped.

It wasn't her feet... It was her *shoes*. She couldn't bring up the front of her foot or her heel. Her shoes were stuck to the stone pavement, as though they had been glued down by some kind of adhesive.

White crystals. A thin sheet of ice had frozen her soles right to the stone pavement.

"A dirty trick you used there."

"Ice?! But...?"

The mountain of wreckage came crashing down. The assassin could not turn around. She realized everything that was happening by sound alone.

It was unbelievable.

A close-range explosion couldn't have given enough time for the self-defense functions of astral energy to trigger. It wasn't invincible.

Even if it had sensed its host was in danger, it would have needed to perceive the explosion as a threat before taking on defensive action, at which point Alice would have already been engulfed by the blast.

"Phew. I was *this* close to being crushed."

The colossal icicle sent several hundred pounds of steel rubble flying. Below it, Alice stood up, completely unharmed.

"...You defended yourself in a split second?!"

"I've been on the receiving end of the Imperial forces for a while now. I assume you know what they call me."

"Ah!"

The Ice Calamity Witch. Among the purebreds who appeared in the battlefield, she was the one the Empire saw as the biggest threat because...they could not defeat her.

Her ice wall stopped bombardments and her chill could freeze the very atmosphere until it was like poisonous gas. Even facing a large minefield, she could freeze the earth and render them inactive.

Flame, lightning, or even wind didn't have the defensive ability to match hers. Only the class of ice power could have automatic self-defense capabilities. That was the reason why Queen Nebulis IIX allowed her precious daughter to head to the frontline alone.

"But that was a paper-thin margin."

Turning her eyes away from the captured assassin, Alice looked at the buildings standing to the left, right, and back of her.

The building walls glittered beautifully with ice.

On the ones weakened from the blast, there were thick ice chunks coating the foundations and supporting them. Had the ice not been there, the row of dated buildings would have collapsed.

“You’re the worst.”

Alice turned around again, her eyes brimming with glacial fury.

“It would’ve been a disaster had the buildings fallen. How many victims would there have been?”

“Don’t tell me...you prevented them from coming down in addition to protecting yourself... All within seconds of the explosion...” The assassin’s shoulders trembled.

She was the ultimate weapon of the House of Lou. They had waited for a time when *Alice was absent* to implement the assassination plan.

They should never have made an enemy out of her. They couldn’t hope to match her in battle.

“I suppose that’s enough.”

The lumps of ice creaked.

Unable to do anything about it, the assassin was encapsulated in a pillar of ice. Shrieking from within the cage of icicles, her voice never made it outside.

“I regret even speaking to you. You may talk all you want in your cell.” Alice turned her back to the ice column.

She had lost all interest in this would-be assassin. There was another assailant she was tracking.

...That violet flash didn’t come from a little plastic explosive... That explosion occurred because of astral power.

She still hadn’t gotten a response from Rin. She had to be somewhere close by. She should have arrived at the scene before Alice. If she hadn’t, she wouldn’t have purposefully set her communications device to restricted settings.

“Rin! Just where are—?”

There was a roar blasting through the radius, the loudest one of the evening.

3

"I'm getting tired of seeing your face."

Astral flames were created when the energy was compressed, manifesting as a substance.

The violet embers fluttered through the night sky, beautiful like butterflies.

"Burst."

...They turned into a rain of fire, pouring down on Iska's head.

Even though each of them was the size of a fingernail, they were blazing motes of pure energy. If they grazed his clothing, he would have immediately caught fire. The flames would have been inextinguishable.

...I can't be careless enough to let it touch a single hair on my head.

...I guess this is as brutal as Kissing's thorns!

He leaped back.

Flames touched down on the pavement. The rock surface instantly liquified.

"Tsk!" He couldn't dodge all of them.

He swept away embers in his path with the tip of his sword, swiveling around. He used his right leg as a pivot to twist his body like a top and cut down the flames behind him.

"Oh, how frightening. Do you have eyes on the back of your head?" She manipulated gravity.

Before his eyes was Vichyssoise, rising up into the air. Her transparent body had practically melted into the night sky from Iska's perspective.

He had let her escape.

Vichyssoise was already higher up than the buildings.

...She got me... She wasn't actually trying to catch me with the astral flames. She used a wide-range attack to get me to back off.

The violet rain subsided.

“What nice eyes—overflowing with tension and hostility. *You really do get it*.” The witch laughed loudly.

Iska didn’t want to let her escape. She had seen through that.

“I’d like Sisbell to feel despair as she watches from her hiding spot. I’ll crush you with my trump card... The ultimate cannon, the Magic Shot of Corpses.”

A black spot, even darker than night, was created between the witch’s outstretched hands. A globe that rejected all light.

...What is that? ...It’s too black. It’s not reflecting any light at all!

Was that astral power?

Pure black consumed all light. And this witch’s astral power was gravity.

If he correctly identified what this sphere of darkness was...

“Not a black hole!”

“Correct. It’s too late now.”

A black hole. It was born from the death of a star, the ultimate gravitational field that could absorb even light.

Crack. The fragments of stone pavement under Iska’s feet audibly crumbled to pieces. They were sucked in toward the gaping dot in the night sky.

“...You’re planning on sucking up all the rubble on the ground?!”

They flew from earth to sky.

The streetlamp poles bowed. It was going to suck up everything—from the cans rolling along the pavement, the small cars that had been illicitly abandoned, and even fragments of buildings that had crumbled from the earlier blast.

He didn’t think she would stop there.

“The black hole can meddle with any inorganic substance. See for yourself. The corpses on the ground are growing.”

She meant the ruins and rubble.

Hundreds of pieces of steel larger than Iska were pulled into the sky toward a single point, an amalgamation of wreckage that rivaled a building in size.

“A third of an ounce—” called down the beguiling voice of an inhuman girl. “I wonder if you know what weighs a third of an ounce? It’s about the weight of a single coin.”

“.....”

“The answer is a bullet.”

Just a third of an ounce. Just one was enough to send a human or even a large beast to the ground.

If a building-sized mass of debris was forming in the air...

“Isn’t it lovely? No one has ever seen a bullet this big, which means no one knows how to defend against it either.” Vichyssoise turned to look up at the sky with her arms outstretched.

She gathered fragments of rubble and pebbles.

“Magic Shot of Corpses . Fire.”

A six-thousand-ton bullet.

There was enough steel to construct an entirely new building. The wreckage from the ground had condensed near the black hole, forming a warped sphere.

Echoing through the fourteenth district was not a sound, but the destructive shockwave.

The mass descended from the sky. Its diameter was about the size of the alley that Iska was standing in. That meant he couldn’t cut it with his astral sword. There wasn’t even enough time for the word “dodge” to enter Iska’s head.

“Uhhh?!”

An invisible impact knocked him down and blew Iska away.

His back hit a concrete wall. He blacked out for a few seconds. When he came to his senses a moment later, the stone pavement was gone.

There was just a crater carved out like a big bowl.

...Was that...wind pressure? ...It wasn't even a direct attack. The aftershock blew me away...!

He wiped his cut lip.

From within the tremendous dust cloud, he could see his astral swords had been scattered onto the ground.

...I trained to not let go of my swords even while unconscious... I guess this is the first time I've ever dropped them.

That was how large of an impact it had been.

On top of that, it hadn't been the force of the bullet. This had happened from the wind pressure alone. Just by looking at the crater below his eyes, he could tell it rivaled the pulverizing force of an Imperial missile.

"How pitiful." From the air, the witch laughed scornfully as Iska tried to get up from the building wall. The black hole was still there.

"So that didn't crush you. How unfortunate that I'll need to fire a second bullet."

".....Wonderful."

He picked up his swords.

He contorted his face from the sharp pain in his back. "I'm glad I scraped by with minor injuries from the first one."

In comparison to the force of the Magic Shot of Corpses, a human was *too light*. He had been helpless, knocked back by the wind pressure that had ended up saving his life.

"Was that a bluff?" The witch was calm as ever. "Doesn't look minor to me. Doesn't look like you scraped by either. Nothing 'wonderful' about it. You're going to experience that pain again."

"I saw through your trick."

He exhaled, tasting blood. Through the cloud of dust, he thrust out the point of his astral sword.

"You're stingy. Which makes you soft, Vichyssoise!"

“Fire.”

It was the second shot. The rubble rocketed toward the ground.

However, he saw something this time.

Just as a bullet was fired at the trigger of a gun, her weapon unleashed its attack when her astral light flashed.

Iska leaped. As soon as the magic shot was fired, he swept up his astral sword faster than the witch could see.

It was like a building was coming down on him.

He launched himself up, bringing down his sword at the approaching magic shot.

“Hah!” With his sword thrust forward, Iska landed on the projectile—using it as midair footing.

“Whaa?!” A shriek escaped the witch’s lips.

She had managed to shed her emotional capacity for fear upon taking on this monstrous form, but it started to bubble within her again. That was because she had realized what the Imperial swordsman had been after.

He could reach her. The Imperial swordsman’s blade had a means of reaching the witch, high in the night sky.

“Why, you insolent little—!”

A third shot. A fourth.

Compared to the first bullet, these were small and slow. That was because the first shot was intended to be a one-hit kill. She hadn’t originally assumed she would need to fire a second one.

...The subsequent ones are remnants of the previous attack, after all... There isn’t much rubble left to become a bullet. That’s why it can’t pick up speed.

She should have used up all the rubble for her first shot. Even if she had missed making a direct hit, she should have put enough power into the aftereffect to vaporize and kill him.



She was too late.

He kicked off the bullet he was riding on, thrusting his sword down toward the third attack. He sunk his blade into the fragments of the building to anchor himself.

Then he soared. He jumped past the fourth magic shot, toward the witch floating in the sky.

“Ha-ha! So you’ve come to let yourself burn in the astral flames!”

Looking down on Iska as he leaped up, Vichyssoise thrust her hand out. The intense violet in her palm flared in the night sky.

“Now, astral flames—”

“Release.”

Flame collided with flame, canceling each other out.

“...What?”

She couldn’t wrap her head around what had happened...when her attack had been directly offset by the astral flames created by Iska’s astral sword.

Namely, the white one.

At Iska’s command, he could release the astral powers that the black blade had extinguished.

“.....What...did...you do...?”

Vichyssoise realized...that she had been defeated.

Her astral flames had been extinguished. Her secret weapon had been turned around and used as footing.

“You dare defy the Hydra? You...better sleep with one eye open.....! You have no idea...*there are ‘monsters’ more terrifying than me —*”

The sword flashed.

Iska’s blade lacerated the witch’s transparent flesh.

Particles of light burst from her wounds, not blood.

Out of her skin spilled a spray of minute lights, glittering with astral energy.

“.....”

Vichyssoise was starting to descend. Since she was unconscious, there was nothing to break her fall. She would hit the bedrock without even being able to right herself.

“Rin.”

“Hush.”

An earth golem broke her fall. A hand three yards wide caught the witch.

“I don’t intend to have you bossing me around.”

The girl with the honey-brown hair looked up at Iska as he fell to the ground.

“I’m annoyed that you noticed me...especially an Imperial swordsman like you. I was in a cold sweat, but it seems you took down this monster in the end.”

“—— What? Ouch!”

Thunk. After more than twenty yards of free-falling, Iska hit the stone pavement.

The earth golem stood next to him without a single word.

“What about me?! Shouldn’t you have caught me, as well? I was convinced the golem would reach out for me, too!”

“Tsk. You survived.”

“...Hey. Clicking your tongue at me isn’t...”

“Don’t get any strange ideas. On top of you and Lady Alice being enemies, I have no obligations to you... Does it look like I caught her gently?”

The golem cradled the witch. Well, not exactly. It was squeezing her as firmly as it could to keep her restrained. She wouldn’t be able to run away, even when she regained consciousness.

“Did you want me to catch you?”

“...Actually, I think I’m fine.”

“Hm.” Alice’s attendant scowled.

Before her gaze, the witch who had released all her astral energy was once again returning to human form.

Her assassin clothes had burned away. Though hidden by the golem's hands, she was stark naked.

"House Hydra's inquisitor. As far as I am aware, she was a human who could manipulate gravity... I cannot imagine her monstrous form. Is she human or genuinely a monster?"

"Are you sure you're allowed to tell me that stuff?"

"I'm talking to myself. I wasn't telling you anything." She turned her face away to snub him. "...I haven't lied. I cannot believe what I saw. If I don't tell myself what it was, I will end up doubting my own eyes."

"I wouldn't worry about that. With everything else going on."

The alley was unrecognizable.

The concrete walls had been broken to smithereens. There wasn't a single window remaining in range. The fused rubble showed evidence of getting scorched by astral flames.

"We have a difference in opinion." Rin looked indecisive. "It would have been ideal to have evidence that she acted on behalf of the House of Hydra—not evidence of her being a monster."

"You kept watch over me because that's what you wanted?"

"No. Ultimately, Lady Alice had simply ordered me to keep an eye on Lady Sisbell. With one of our own after Lady Sisbell's life, we could not leave things to Imperial forces."

"...I see. Seems like Alice."

A sigh escaped his lips, and even he did not know the emotion behind it.

"I think I've come to understand that relations within Nebulis are complicated."

Alice had wanted to save her sister.

On the other hand, Sisbell was suspicious of the possibility that her sister was

secretly working with Lord Mask. That was exactly why Alice couldn't openly offer her a hand.

"Anyway—hm? What is this powder?"

Rin raised her face.

Fine dust was falling on her head. She pinched it dubiously between her fingertips and turned to look behind her as though she had sensed something. She froze in place.

Debris was sprinkling down on them. A terrifying crack had formed in an aged building. When she looked closely, the whole building was leaning over.

"What's happening?! The building is going to collapse! Rin! Support it with the golem!"

"W-wait a second! I don't have enough time to create one! You do something, Imperial swordsman! This stuff is—"

"Freeze."

Ice vines twined around it, closing the fissure. The wall of ice jutted out of the ground, supporting the half-crumbled building, keeping it in place.

Whose power had that been? Everyone knew the answer to that question.

"Lady Alice!" Rin promptly bowed to her lady, who had come running from beyond the building. "Please look! I have restrained Lady Sisbell's assassin. Just me! I did this!"

"Liar!"

"...Haa...ah...s-seriously...what in the world happened?" Alice's glossy, golden hair whipped around. Her voice was faint like she had sprinted all the way here.

"I want to know about the assassin...and about that earlier blast... Why are you here, Iska? Where is my sister?"

"She's being protected by my unit. It's just—"

The stomping footsteps approaching them had to be the military police's reinforcements.

"I'll be in hot water if they find me, so I'm heading out. I'm leaving her in your

hands.”

“W-wait right there, Iska! Her? ...Is that Vichyssoise?!” Alice’s throat quivered in shock when she saw the girl captured by Rin’s golem. “She’s part of the House of Hydra. Which means the one who attacked my mother...”

“That conflict hasn’t got anything to do with me. She tried attacking Sisbell, so I fought to protect her. That’s all,” Iska said.

“...Yes. That’s how it is.” Alice looked bitterly at the witch.

Her eyes were opened wide. “Wait, Iska. I’ve made a terrible realization.”

“Huh?”

“Why is she naked? That’s an issue I cannot overlook!”

“*That’s* what you’re concerned about?!”

Vichyssoise had been wearing clothes to hide her form, which had been burned to a crisp by the astral flames. Even her flesh had changed. There was no way Alice would have been able to imagine Vichyssoise in that form.

“...I cannot turn a blind eye. Okay, Iska. I’ve got something to say to you.” Alice looked at him, seeming resolved. “If I put my mind to it, I’d look way more amazing than Vichyssoise when stripped down!”

“What do you mean if you *put your mind to it* ?!”

“Lady Alice, are you mad?!”

Iska and Rin caught themselves yelling at the same time. Alice was bright red in the face and breathing haggardly.

“B-but it’s important. I don’t want to lose in front of you...though that was a little embarrassing.”

“...I’m getting secondhand embarrassment.”

“W-whatever! Go back to guarding Sisbell!”

“You’re the one who stopped *me* !”

Yelled at by the enemy princess, Iska retreated down alleyways that rang from the alarm.

CONTINUED



Dance of the Sun, Moon, and Stars

1

The Nebulis palace.

The Moon Spire stretched up as though to pierce the night sky. It served as the residence of the Zoa family, descendants of the Founder. Those serving in the palace were attendants who stood by their ideals.

The fourth floor of the Moon Spire.

Six men and women stood in the Moon Shadow: the secret room marked off by four layers of walls. Among those six humans was a beast lying on the ground.

The astral beast. Carbuncle.

Foxlike with a pomegranate pelt. It normally lived deep in the planet, never to appear on the surface. They couldn't be domesticated.

Or so it was said.

"There, there. Aren't you a little one? Good job catching the scent. I see...the blast in the queen's room seems to undoubtedly have been caused by the Hydras."

It seemed there was one exception to the rule. The House of Zoa. Beast tamers.

Not even Queen Nebulis IIX knew that an astral beast was being kept as a pet.

Carbuncle could track the scent of astral energy, like a police dog.

The astral beast had already sniffed out the culprit of the assassination plot several days ago.

"Boy, you've made an uncharacteristic blunder. To think you allowed yourself

to become a suspect in the queen's assassination attempt."

"Hm, you're being so harsh, grandmother." Lord Mask leaned against the wall. "I thought it would have been even more entertaining to obediently let them collar me. That's all it is. As long as we have the astral beast, we will be able to find the culprit immediately. Although, I did have my own guess."

"Lord Talisman, how would you suggest we deal with the Zoa?"

"This is a serious affair. Allow me to manage it."

The Hydra family's head. Talisman, the Wave.

That fence-straddler always took a neutral position between the Lou and Zoa. Ever since he had been so forthright about that, Lord Mask had gotten a full picture of the story.

"The House of Hydra has made its move. The faction under the water's surface for nearly a century has thrown their hat into ring."

He started to address the elder who sat in a wheelchair at the center of the six people.

That was the Zoa family's head: Growley, the Sin, someone who held astral powers of an incredibly specialized countering variety.

Over seventy, the woman could no longer move her legs due to an injury sustained by the Imperial forces. However, the glint in her eyes was filled with life.

"Do you believe they are challenging us?" she rasped "We rouse ourselves with rage and gain revenge with composure. We scorned those three sisters, our enemies in the conclave after the retirement of Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX. We hadn't considered the House of Hydra would make a bid."

"Exactly," Lord Mask continued. "The Hydra used a drastic measure. By putting suspicion of the assassination on us, they're trying to force us out of the conclave. An intense and double-edged plan."

They had to be confident. They believed they could *still win even after failing at their scheme to assassinate the queen* .

"There is no doubt that the next conclave will be the fiercest one to date.

There is no doubt that the strongest candidate for queen in the House of Lou is the middle princess. However, with the Hydra, this has become a good opportunity for us.”

Lord Mask put out his hand to pat the black hair of a petite girl.

“Isn’t that right, Kissing?”

“.....”

Kissing Zoa Nebulis. A purebred. Witch of Thorns.

She was dressed in doll-like clothing, and her eyes were covered just as when Iska had met her.

“It may almost be time for you to remove those blinders.”

“...Really?”

“Yes, of course. We’ll have you use your powers as much as you wish.” The masked man spoke in a soft voice. “Before we destroy the Empire. Out of necessity, we will eliminate the star and sun. It is time for the moon to shine.”

2

Then dawn began to break.

For forty years, the Sovereignty had looked the same. The central state was illuminated by the sunrise. Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX kept watch of the streets.

The queen’s room felt chilly, though it wasn’t cold enough for her breath to turn white.

“...This never used to happen.”

Her skin formed goosebumps from the cold. She knew she was on the decline, though she had never imagined it would actually happen.

Back in her teens, she had feared nothing. As a girl, she had been at her peak as an astral mage, going to the battlefield only to fight for her homeland.

If there *had* been one exception...

“Mira, *you’re not fit to be queen.*”

“Why, Salinger? Why...did you come all the way here to tell me that?!”

“You’re a fool. You’ve got to become crueler. Otherwise, you cannot become a witch.”

“...No. Let’s not do that.”

That had occurred thirty years ago. She was no longer a girl, but a mother. The queen.

On that day, in this room, she had exchanged those words with Salinger. She would stop recalling the battle of life and death that had transpired there.

Right now...she needed to focus on two matters.

First, the war with the Imperial forces. Her policy on that had not changed.

Second, making sure *Aliceliese* is coronated as queen in the conclave.

She had never told anyone of the latter goal, but she was adamant about it.

“I’m sorry, Elletear and Sisbell. I know you’re both excellent. But you aren’t fit for this role...”

The queen had to be powerful.

She required the power to defend herself when assassins from the Imperial forces approached. The only one of the three sisters who fulfilled that requirement was Aliceliese. Neither Elletear nor Sisbell had astral powers fit for battle.

In particular, Elletear’s astral powers were the *weakest* . Around the palace, it was rumored that they were worthless.

“But it is all right. You are fine ladies. I want you to support Alice as aides to the queen...”

For that purpose, she would eliminate whatever got in the way. She needed to root out the ones who had planned the coup and expel them from the royal family.

“.....”

Clack...

Clack...

The sound of clinking pebbles came from every corner. This was nothing new. It echoed through the place all night.

The walls were getting patched up.

This castle was the “Planetary Stronghold,” created by their powers a century ago. Astral essences inhabited the walls, spontaneously mending any flaws when recharged with energy.

“But the traces of the explosion will disappear.”

The culprit knew that. Because the room would spontaneously recover, they could no longer identify the type of attack that had been launched.

...Alice’s report says Vichyssoise was the one who targeted Sisbell... In that case, the Hydra are after me.

It wouldn’t take long for the evidence to disappear completely with the room’s full restoration.

“Sisbell, that’s exactly why I need you. Please come home safe.”

The queen needed Alice to win. That was her condition for victory.

“And the next conclave will be—”

3

“The Lou. The queen thinks they’ll win.”

“If that girl just comes home?”

“Yes. That is what I wanted to discuss. You arrived at exactly the right time.”

He settled deep into a seat. Holding up a porcelain coffee cup as though to give a toast, the burly man cheerfully raised his voice.

He was the head of the Hydra household, Talisman.

In a terrace under the blinding sun, he wore a formal white suit. With his chiseled features, sharp looks, and immaculate gray hair, he exuded charm.

However...it paled in comparison to that of the woman who had appeared in

the Solar Spire's balcony.

"Good morning, Elletear, my dear."

"Good morning to you, Lord Talisman. It is an honor to be invited to morning tea."

The eldest princess Elletear smiled.

Showered by morning sunlight, her emerald hair glittered more than any jewel.

Her skin was pearlescent. Her cleavage generously peeked out from her wide neckline.

"Care for some black tea? Or do you still only drink water?"

"I will ask for hot water."

"All right then. Prepare the best water. Ice thawed from the sacred Diana mountain... You there."

An attendant waiting behind Talisman bowed.

"—Come to think of it..." Elletear sat down elegantly, facing the gentleman in the suit. "I heard there was a festival last night in Liesbaden, Lord Talisman. Was it the thing in question?"

"It seems she has failed." The head of the family sipped from his coffee cup.

He was not taking that action to hide his anxiety or rage. His composed tone communicated this was nothing more than an enjoyable after-meal coffee.

"It seems your sister has excellent guards. I never would have imagined they would be able to turn the tables on Vichyssoise. It's hard to swallow."

"She does? Oh, that is the first I have heard of it." Accepting the cup served to her, Elletear blinked at him.

Her surprise was a rare reaction, as the princess was known for being exceptionally perceptive.

"What to do? How should we deal with Vichyssoise? If they inspect her body, I'm sure many things will be exposed."

“I suggest feigning ignorance.”

“Oh?”

“They will not be able to conclude she is Imperial Test Subject Vi from observing her flesh. And if you try to protect her, you will be suspected by the queen. Oh, and the Zoa.”

She sipped the boiled water. She blew on her cup.

“The Zoa are a spiteful bunch,” she said. “Lord Mask may even suspect me. Ooh. Scary.”

“It is your way of doing things. That was bound to happen.”

He placed his coffee cup on a saucer, crossing his besuited legs. Then, he leaned forward ever so slightly.

“You heard of the phrase ‘a beauty at every angle’? By pleasing everyone, they become trusted by no one.”

“I know.”

“How *many angles* do you have?”

“Three.” The beauty placed her teacup onto the table. “The Empire, the Zoa, and the Hydra. If I were to give a breakdown in percentages, it would be forty, ten, and fifty percent.”

“.....”

“Is something the matter?”

“Always the bold one.” Talisman let a snicker escape from his lips. “Also, the House of Lou seems to be—”

“Oh, please, my Lord. I only speak the truth,” she said delightedly, as though this was amusing to her.

The devilish beauty put her hands to her blushing cheeks and broke into a smile.

“But, my lord, about the matter you were concerned about—about Sisbell.”

Elletear continued to smile as she uttered her sister’s name.

“It would be bad for both of us if Sisbell returned, Lord Talisman.”

“Ah yes. Especially after what occurred in the queen’s room—”

“I am thinking of reining in Sisbell. Would you allow me to handle this?”

“You?” Talisman narrowed his eyes.

This came as a surprise. The eldest princess was trying to step out from behind the scenes.

“Because I know her the best.” She put her hand to her plush chest.

Her eyes were gentle and elicited affection from anyone who looked into them.

“Now, my lord. That girl has formidable guards. Guards that defeated Vichyssoise. Do you know the best way to make her feel despair?”

“To deal with those guards first? Don’t you think that’s cliché?”

“Indeed.”

“And?”

“We will steal those guards from her.”

She lowered her voice. Even Talisman could not hear her though he was right in front of her.

“Iska...the former Saint Disciple, huh? I would like to meet him.”

“Iska?”

“Oh nothing, just talking to myself. I have a habit of doing that when I’m enjoying things.”

“How can we steal her guards? With money?”

“I will determine the method. Something delightful. If I am able to make them mine, I think that would be so splendid... Did I say too much?”

She smiled bashfully as though she were embarrassed. That little grin would make any man hers. It even worked on young maidens. It spoke volumes of her beauty.

“I mean, it’s unfair. My mother and Alice have strong astral powers. Even

Sisbell was blessed with something good and acquired powerful guards. *But I am the only one with nothing.* ”

“Oh? I suppose it’s a little sibling rivalry.”

“It’s the secret to enjoying this world. I would like to live with envy, rage, longing, and every kind of emotion in my chest. I would like to enjoy myself.”

Talisman was composed. The girl with emerald hair observed him. The corners of her lips curled up.

“Isn’t that what a witch is?”

EPILOGUE



The Witch's Crown

1

The Nebulis Sovereignty. The eighth state, Liesbaden.

Mismis was panting in the cool, early morning air as she dashed through the main streets, attempting to cut through the waves of people. Unlike yesterday, crowds filled the paths.

But not just average citizens. There were also newspaper reporters and interviewers.

"Haah, ah...haa...uh! C'mon! Hurry up, Jhin, Nene!"

"Hey, Commander. If you run like that, you'll trip."

"We're not going to make it anyway. It's a transport vehicle carrying her. It's already left."

Nene and Jhin weren't in a hurry as they walked down the path. Nene nibbled at her breakfast. Jhin held a gossip magazine in his hand.

"'Explosion of Unknown Cause in Liesbaden. What's Its Relation to the Coup?'...huh. No real information. Just stating the obvious."

The monster called Vichyssoise.

The inhuman thing that Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis had witnessed was not mentioned.

They didn't know whether the media hadn't gotten ahold of the information or if it had been censored.

"She is not what the Imperial forces would call a purebred. Her blood is too 'thin.'"

"The Hydra family welcomed a child with a distant relation to the bloodline."

That was all according to Sisbell from the night before.

“Blood relations aside, that witch has got to be related to the royal family. That’s who we have to protect her from, huh.”

“Jh-Jhin... We’d be in trouble if someone hears you!” Nene warned.

“I didn’t say her name. Look, the police aren’t even so much as giving us a glance anyway.”

The people were heading to the alley, the scene of the explosion.

It was the site of Iska and Vichyssoise’s mortal struggle. There were reports of a large crater on the surface.

“They’re trying to make a blind spot by shipping the witch away at dawn. It won’t do us any good to see her off.”

“B-but...aren’t you worried?! She’s a scary monster! What if she escapes and attacks us...?”

Mismis wanted to watch Vichyssoise make her departure. At the very least, until they drove away. The witch haunted her psyche, ever since she laid eyes on her.

“And Iska’s already going over there ahead of us.”

“L-let’s go! I’m the commander, so you better—”

She wasn’t watching where she was going. A pedestrian was walking through the crosswalk, right in her path.

“Oh, Commander. Someone’s in front of you.”

“Huh?Ow! Ouch?! ”

They crashed into each other.

Mismis’s nose bumped right into an elbow. She staggered backward.

“Ow, ouch, ouch...I-I thought I was about to break my nose...”

“Hey, little girl.”

“E-EEK?! O-oh, right. I’m sorry!” She looked up in a panic, feeling someone glaring at her.

The man was the physical opposite of Mismis. While she was petite and childish, he was conspicuously tall with a handsome physique. He had coarse silver hair and a pale face with dashing features.

Had she stumbled into a top model? Mismis saw he was only wearing a thick coat on his burly upper body.

“.....Tsk.” The handsome man clicked his tongue at her. “Do you have marbles for eyes?”

“I’m so sorrrrrrrrry! I-I’m poor! Please spare my money. I can give you a coupon for barbecue, if you’d like! Please take this and forgive me... Oh wait, this was for an Imperial restaurant.”

“Boss. When are you going to stop talking to yourself? He’s already gone.”

“H-huh?” Mismis opened her eyes wide.

When she raised her head, the man was no longer in front of her, crossing the street on the far end.

“He doesn’t want the coupon? What an unusual person...”

“He probably felt creeped out about bumping into a cryptid and ran off. Good judgment. I’d do that, too.”

“Jhin, whose side are you on?!”

“Hey, Commander.” Nene shrugged and poked the captain on the shoulder as Mismis puffed up her cheeks. “If we don’t hurry, we won’t make it. Plus, Iska’s already gone ahead of us.”

2

In the southwest section of Liesbaden, the city outskirts.

A distance from the throng of buildings in the shopping district was the military police headquarters, located in a block lined with old buildings. The troops formed a line in the early morning.

They were looking ahead at a single escort vehicle.

It housed Vichyssoise, the culprit caught in the act of maiming people and

damaging property. The car was going to whisk her away to the central state.

“Lady Alice, preparations for the vehicle are complete.”

“.....”

“Lady Alice, wake up. Get a grip.”

“Hmm...b-but I was with the chief for questioning all night. I’m sleepy.”

She closed her eyes as she stood at attention. As Rin jostled her, Alice held back her large yawn.

“I can’t believe it. It was absurd to question me. You know much more about Vichyssoise, Rin.”

“You were the one who captured her, so it stands to reason, Lady Alice.”

“...Hmph.”

She knew that. The one who had turned the tables on Sisbell’s assailant had been Iska. However, Alice was proceeding to feign ignorance that Sisbell had hired an Imperial unit.

She wouldn’t tell them Iska’s name.

In which case, she ended up being the hero who had apprehended Vichyssoise. Since the witch had been such an atrocious monster, it made sense to pin this achievement on Alice.

...It’ll increase goodwill for the Lou... And keep the coup targeting my mother’s life in check.

Her sleepiness was an issue. Just standing there absentmindedly made her eyelids start to droop.

“Lady Alice, would you like me to pour you some tea?”

“Sure... *Haah* ... Could hold back this drowsiness..... *Zzz* ...”

“Please don’t sleep while you talk.”

Rin’s voice grew distant. Her head couldn’t register it anymore. She had no idea what she was saying.

“Tha...ha.....Sisbell...so.....”

“_____”

She picked up on her sister's name, but it was no use. She couldn't make out the rest.

“Oh, the Imperial swordsman.”

“Where?! Where?! Here?!? Iska! Iska! Where is he?!”

She snapped back to her senses. Her brain fog cleared. Her leaden body felt light as a feather.

“Rin, where is he?”

“Gotcha.”

“.....”

“Lady Alice, I approve of you wanting to battle your formidable enemy. However, please use more discretion. I wish I didn't have to say this.”

Suddenly she came back to reality. The military police were observing her, wondering what was going on with her outburst.

“...I'll get into the car.”

“Yes.”

They headed to Cadillac One, the vehicle for the royal family, parked behind the grounds.

Her goal was to monitor Vichyssoise. Alice would ride in this car and travel with the escort vehicle to the central state.

...I need to return to the palace... I'm just returning home ahead of Sisbell.

There was something that was unusual. Rin would not be riding with her.

“Lady Alice, please be careful. Vichyssoise is not the girl you know. She is a literal monster.”

“.....”

“She was entirely inhuman when she battled the Imperial soldier.”

“I know that Iska had difficulties.”

Iska had fought the Founder Nebulis and the sorcerer Salinger. Yet, even he had been forced into a close match when battling Vichyssoise. She realized more than enough what a threat Vichyssoise was.

“If she tries to escape, I’ll attack her with all I’ve got. I’ll assume she’s an Imperial soldier.”

“Please think the same of the Hydra as well.”

“...I intend to.”

That was Vichyssoise’s clan.

With the assassination incident, they were the closest to being guilty.

“This coup has heightened my awareness. I will stay with my mother to protect her. During that time, I will leave Sisbell in your care.”

She got into the car.

She beckoned to Rin from the open window and whispered quietly into her attendant’s ear.

“Rin, listen closely.”

“Yes.”

“If she gets close to Iska, stop her. Make sure not to forget to report it to me.”

“Is that the only reason I’m here?!”

“I’m serious about both matters.”

She really was worried about Sisbell, too. However, Alice’s true motive was to keep an eye on Iska to make sure he wasn’t stolen away from her.

...A strange dilemma... But it’s fine. Once he is done guarding her, I won’t have to worry.

It was just until Sisbell returned to the central state. Once that happened, all ties between Iska and Sisbell would disappear.

“See you, Rin—at the palace.”

“Yes, Lady Alice.”

The window of Cadillac One began to roll up.

The attendant bowed. While Alice was staring at Rin, she didn't notice something behind the moving car.

Outside of the grounds, a boy and girl made their way to the facility.

"We're right on time. Look, Iska."

The large escort vehicle surrounded by military police started to move.

That five armored cars stretched behind indicated they were carrying a threat.

"I believe that's the vehicle carrying Vichyssoise. Just as I anticipated, they waited for dawn before leaving."

"They really did. We didn't see her get in though... Is that fine?"

"That isn't an issue." In disguise, Sisbell stared at the escort vehicle from the shadows of the building. "We've made sure she hasn't escaped. We will leave the rest to our family inquisitor. I cannot be preoccupied with that assassin all the time."

Her grip tightened around Iska's sleeve. She wasn't going to let Vichyssoise get away. Her fingertips were trembling with fear.

...I mean, she was almost assassinated...by a real monster at that.

And there was a possibility that there was another one.

They would need to prepare to head to the central state with bated breath.

"Once I reach the palace, that will settle things. Because I can reveal who targeted the queen using Illumination..."

"We're waiting for word from your attendant, right?"

"Yes. Shuvalts will be able to talk to the queen sometime today. A plan to safely head to the central state should reveal itself to us naturally." Sisbell pointed at the way home.

—Let's withdraw. Before the military police see us.

Iska turned around, reading her mind. Tugging on his sleeve, Sisbell followed him.

“...Iska.”

“Hm?”

“Was it hard to fight Vichyssoise? What did you think as an Imperial Saint Disciple?”

“Former.”

“You’re so particular. Then as a former Saint Disciple?”

“...You saw the ruins of that destruction. Even I can’t guarantee that I’d be able to win again.”

He could say that about purebreds as a whole. If the Founder’s descendants could be defeated easily, the war between the Empire and Sovereignty would not have continued for a century.

“But it’s not about how strong she was.”

“Huh?”

“There’s affinity when it comes to astral power. It’s not a simple matter of physical strength...”

Kissing could have eliminated even that Magic Shot of Corpses with her thorns.

Alice probably could have dealt with it using her ice flower.

But...Iska had felt something that surpassed all notions of relativity.

“She was eerie. I guess it was a sense that something was out of place. I couldn’t get my mind off what it was I was fighting.”

He hadn’t been able to focus on the battle. That experience had been unknown territory for Iska.

“...Is that what you would call fear?”

“I guess it’s being fainthearted for a guard.”

“.....No...” She stopped.

As though implying something, Sisbell gripped Iska’s hand in the shadow of the building, in the humid air.

“Like I said last night. In the past, I witnessed a monster other than Vichyssoise. Because of that, I could no longer trust the royal family.”

“Yeah.”

“Something even more terrifying than Vichyssoise ...”

“...What did you say?”

“I knew by instinct the moment I saw it. It wasn’t human.” The witch princess clung to his arm.

This was different. She wasn’t trying to seduce him. She was just a girl clinging to him in a cry for help, tormented by fear.

“I feel the same. Iska, it happened to me, too. Since the night I saw that jet-black monster, I have not been able to stop trembling...”

“ ”

“I’m frightened—of the possibility that it won’t end with Vichyssoise. It’s not about her powers. I think nothing in history has been as strong as the Revered Founder. But...that monster was more malignant and twisted.....”

The youngest princess hugged his side. Sisbell buried her face in Iska’s chest, desperately enduring a sobbing fit.

“I can’t help but feel as though...there is a monster that should be called a ‘witch’ in its true meaning.”

Four days until the coincidental meeting with *the weakest purebred in the royal family* .

The eldest princess and the Successor of the Black Steel—Elletear and Iska would cross paths like ships at night.

Iska would come to learn about an extremely different type of “witch.”

Afterword

The war of the sisters. Chaos in paradise.

Thank you so much for picking up this volume of *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World* !

This is a story of Sisbell, the youngest princess. She made her first appearance in the fourth volume, costarring with her sister Alice, manipulated by fate.

The theme was “feigning ignorance.”

It’s about Alice and Rin pretending they know nothing about Iska’s contact with Sisbell and Elletear plotting behind the scenes. All of them carry undisclosed secrets, as they move toward their own goals and ambitions.

Will Elletear be brought to the forefront in the next volume, bringing all three sisters together?

Here’s a little taste of the story to come: • Elletear makes contact (with Iska).

- Alice and Sisbell threaten each other (over Iska).
- They all wage sister war.

I’m in the middle of thinking about this three-stage plan. I know it’s bare bones, but I hope you want to find out how this plot progresses in the next volume.

I have some announcements.

I’m going to start with adaptations.

In the *Young Animal* magazine, this series has a manga adaptation by Okama. We modified it to fit the medium, so I love reading through them. It might take some time for a physical volume to come out, but I will let you know when that happens.

I have one other happy piece of news.

In the 2018 New Light Novel Series Ranking on BOOK WALKER, *Our Last Crusade* came in third place!

I am ecstatic it made it into the top three (out of a pool of several hundred books). I feel so fortunate. To those of you who voted, and to all of you who read this series, you have my gratitude!

I will make sure to keep the momentum going! I hope you continue to enjoy it.

I think the sixth volume may come out in winter.

The war between the three sisters is finally about to start. (...Maybe? Find out when it comes out!) It's going well, so I am looking forward to its publication.

I have one other series that is being published, so I would like to introduce it now.

Published by MF Bunko J, *Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World?*

The fifth volume is anticipated to be published on October 25, 2018.

The first volume of the manga is already on sale. The numbers are looking in good shape.

Since *Our Last Crusade* received great praise from the BOOK WALKER ranking, I would like to work my hardest to make sure it's on par with this series. Please check it out!

I'd like to give my thanks.

To the illustrator Ao Nekonabe. It's been a while since we had Alice on the cover. She is adorable and cute as always. Thank you!

And to my managing editor K. From the novels to the *Dragon Magazine* short stories and even the manga, I feel at ease knowing that you make sure to always read the manuscripts thoroughly. Thank you!

A tale of the swordsman Iska and the witch princess Alice.

The final bloodline has taken part in the war. In the next volume, I plan on upping the ante.

The plot interweaves Iska and the three witch sisters to draw out the monolithic planetary fate... I hope you look forward to it!

The fifth volume of *Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World?* is anticipated

to be published on October 25, 2018.

Our Last Crusade, Vol. 6 is slated for winter.

I hope to see you again in both.

Listening to the rain at noon, Kei Sazane

<https://twitter.com/sazanek> I occasionally make posts about publication announcements on Twitter.

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